

JULY ★

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SPICY-ADVENTURE STORIES



WOMAN *from*
MERCURY
by Lew Merrill

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When answering advertisements please mention SPICY-ADVENTURE STORIES

By **ELLERY
WATSON
CALDER**

When the mob would no longer listen to Hardesty, the lovely native girl offered first her confession of shame and then followed it up with the sacrifice of her life!

SUNRISE had just exploded like fireworks over the Magdalena jungle country in north-central Colombia when Tim Hardesty found the corpse. Anger and swift concern filled him as he stared at the dead man slumped over the controls of a caterpillar tractor, with four feet of Motilone Indian arrow protruding from the bloodstained back. Death, Hardesty realized, must have been instantaneous.

A quarter mile downriver, Hardesty's construction camp was now stirring into activity in preparation for the forthcoming day's toil. But with his discovery of the slain tractorman, Tim Hardesty knew there would be little work accomplished on the pipe-line job that morning. Not with the savage



FLOW of GOLD

Motilonas on the war-path! The native workers would be thrown into panic; would refuse to venture beyond the safety of the camp proper without military protection.

There was the rub. That military protection, now so badly needed, was being withdrawn this

"Fire and I shall kill this girl!" he said.



very morning. Even as Hardesty stared at the murdered tractor-man, he knew that the troops were preparing to leave his construction camp.

He went plunging back down the river trail toward his headquarters, fists clenched, grey eyes narrowed, holstered automatic slapping against his whipcorded thigh. He must reach Captain Wilhelm Obermann before that worthy embarked his little company of Colombian soldiery for the downstream trip to Covenas; must arrange for the garrison to stay on the job. There was a forty million dollar investment at stake—not to mention two hundred human lives.

Smashing through the rank undergrowth, sweat pouring down his cheeks, Hardesty suddenly halted. *What the devil was that?*

He strained his ears; heard again the faint cry that had arrested him. It came from the river. "Help me. . . !"

IT WAS a woman's voice, desperately beseeching. Hardesty dashed to the water's edge, unmindful of thorns that plucked ribbons from shirt and breeches. He gained the river, peered across its swiftly-flowing surface. A sharp exclamation leaped to his lips.

A girl was swimming out there in the churning water that maelstromed around jagged outcroppings of midstream rocks; a brunette girl, young, white-faced, bashed and buffeted by a river that seemed determined to crush her against the boulders to which she clung. Even as Hardesty spotted

her, she almost lost her hold on a flintlike jut, to be borne toward the waiting teeth of a rocky death-trap farther downstream.

Hardesty whipped off his high-laced boots and his gun-belt; flung himself into the river. He swam with powerful overhand strokes, battling the pull of water that tried to suck him under. "Coming!" he shouted. "Hold hard!"

The girl's response was a frightened wail. "I can't! My hands are slipping—"

He put more drive into his kicking legs and flailing arms; forged ahead at a faster clip. His muscles rebelled at the strain he put upon them, but still he drove himself, fighting the current as if it were a live enemy to be conquered. Then, when he was within a yard of the girl, she let go.

The river picked her up like a chip, rammed her toward a jagged serration of boulders. She screamed, just as Hardesty reached out and hooked his fingers into the neck of her soaked silk dress.

The fragile material tore. Naked feminine shoulders gleamed wetly, like sleek ivory, under Hardesty's hand. The current boiled around him and he lowered his grip, snagged the thin lastex strap of a brassiere where it crossed the girl's flawless back. The strap, too, parted under the strain.

Stroking savagely with his left arm, he encircled his right about her torso, rolled her over so that she floated face-upward. "Felizia Cabrozon!" he breathed as he recognized her. She was the daughter of *Coronel* Juan Cabrozon, of the

Colombian Army, whose station was far upriver near the gorge that led to Rieber Pass. More than once, at army-post holidays, Hardesty had danced with her; casually flirted with her under the watchfulness of an ubiquitous duenna. But what the devil was Felizia doing here in the river now, so far from her father's headquarters?

Her eyes, he noticed, were dark pools of fright; her lips were parted as she tried to cry out. Hardesty's forearm was under her breasts, jamming them upward out of the loosened brassiere, and the sight of those mounded charms sent a tingle through him, despite their mutual jeopardy.

She sensed the impact of his gaze, and she tried to squirm away from him; tried to cover those pouting hillocks of loveliness with her palms. He said: "This is no time for modesty, *senorita!*" and slapped her hands down. Then he began swimming toward shore, angling downriver with the current.

ONCE out of the rapids, the going was easier. The girl, spent by her efforts, relaxed; and presently Tim Hardesty was lifting her from the water, carrying her to the trail. At last he set her on her feet.

She swayed against him for support, trembling and exhausted. But she still had strength enough to say: "I owe you my life, *Senor Hardesty*. Yet was it necessary to tear my dress and brassiere so that you could so rudely stare at me?"

He felt vaguely annoyed. A girl in peril of death had no reason to be so damned conventional, he thought. Moreover, what if he had looked at her? It had been an accident spawned of necessity; certainly he had not made a deliberate play for her. She was acting like a spoiled child, and he thought he detected an undercurrent of coquetry in her manner—as if, now that they were out of danger, she might be expecting him to display still further interest in her femininity. She was looking at him shyly; he had a feeling that she was secretly evaluating his potentialities as a lover.

Her appraising glance embarrassed him. He wanted no payment for saving her life. "Sorry," he said brusquely, peeling off his khaki shirt and handing it to her. "Wear this and forget the whole thing. Now wait here while I find my boots and gun."

A flicker of disappointment seemed to come into her eyes as she accepted the wet shirt and worried herself into it. The soaked khaki adhered to her nubile bosom, just as the lower portion of her dripping frock delineated her slim hips and thighs; Hardesty turned away from her, aware of a strange and sudden yearning to grab her in his arms and kiss her.

He left her, located his boots and belt, donned them and returned. But she was no longer in sight. Down the trail he heard the crackle of footfalls through underbrush as she ran in blind haste.

Puzzled, he pursued her; overtook her. "Don't you know better than to travel alone in country like this? The Motilones—"

"Yes! The Indians!" she answered. "That is why I must hurry to reach Captain Obermann at your camp, *Senor Hardesty!*" Her firm little breasts jounced under the soaked khaki as she ran.

For the first time in many minutes, Hardesty recalled that he, too, had need to catch the German commander of the Colombian garrison which was scheduled to depart that morning. Temporarily he had forgotten the murdered tractorman in the jungle—and all that the murder implied. But now he remembered, and worry leaped into his heart.

THE situation was simple enough. Up at Petrolea, beyond the mountains, two big American oil companies had bought an oil concession, drilled wells that produced a golden flow of high-grade crude. To bring this liquid treasure to the sea, a pipeline was being laid along the Magdalena River, through highland passes and jungle danks. Two crews had begun the work, one from the harbor at Covenas and the other starting from the oil lease itself. Here at Hardesty's camp the lines had finally met; only a few hundred feet of pipe need now be laid to join the job, and then oil would start pumping from the wells to the ocean, two hundred and sixty miles in all.

The task had been tremendous; with no roads at the start, eleven million pounds of freight and materials had been flown in by airplane. Motilone Indians, the most savage tribe in the world, had fought the work at every turn.

Now, though, the job was within a single day of completion—and this single day spelled success or failure because, under the terms of the contract with the Colombian government, the pipe-line must be finished by five o'clock tonight. Otherwise the entire concession—wells, pipe-line, everything—would revert to its original owners, leaving the American companies with a loss of forty million dollars investment.

It was Tim Hardesty's job to lay the final length of connecting pipe before expiration time. Until he had found the slain tractorman, the task had seemed easy enough. Now, though, the picture was changed. With the Motilones on the rampage, Hardesty's peon laborers would balk—unless they had adequate military protection. That protection lay in the hands of Captain Wilhelm Obermann. And now Felizia Cabrozon was saying that she, too, had business with the German officer.

"Why must you see Obermann?" Hardesty demanded.

She panted: "My father learned that the Motilones are planning an attack. He also knew that Captain Obermann had been ordered to withdraw his soldiers from your camp, today."

"Well?"

"Something was wrong with the telegraph line. So my father set out in a river launch to reach your camp and countermand Captain Obermann's orders. I came along. Two miles north of here, the Motilones attacked us, destroyed our launch, k-killed my father."

Running beside her, Hardesty

slipped an arm about her pliant waist. "I'm sorry about that," he said gently.

She went on: "I managed to

Once out of the rapids,
the going was easier.



swim free, under water; I knew I must bring the new order to Captain Obermann. Then the current caught me—and the rest you know."

They reached the clearing that marked the pipe-line construction camp, and Hardesty led the girl to his tent. "I'm sorry if I was gruff with you a while back," he said honestly. "I didn't know what you'd been through."

Her smile was faintly tremulous as she faced him. "I forgive you, *Senor Hardesty*. And . . . I am not ashamed that you looked at me. I am glad you found me . . . agreeable to your eyes."

He knew, then, that he could take her in his arms, kiss her; knew that she was his for the asking. And he wanted her, with a desperate yearning such as he had never before experienced. Her supple

body, so frankly limned by her wet clothing, was an ecstatic poem of feminine curves, luring him, tempting him almost beyond endurance. He hungered to harvest the kisses that brimmed in her crimson lips; his hands tingled. But there were other things to be done just now; more important things.

"GET out of those wet things, dry yourself, get a dress from one of the native women," he said in a voice strained and curiously frigid with strict repression. "I'll be back later." Not noticing the hurt that came into her eyes, not realizing that she thought he was scorning her, he left her alone in the tent and sped toward the tiny military encampment at the far edge of the clearing.

Uniformed soldiers were already gathered at the dock, where a flotilla of three small, armored steam launches rested. But of Captain Obermann, commander of the troop, there was no sign. Relieved that the embarkation had not yet taken place, Hardesty made for the German officer's tent; entered without announcing himself.

His visit was ill-timed. Obermann was not alone. He had a young native girl with him; a girl whom Hardesty recognized. Her name was Teresa; she was the daughter of a peon laborer. Tawny, small, surprisingly pretty for a *mestizo*, she was on her knees before Obermann, pleading with him. "If you leave, you must take me with you, my lover!"

Sardonic amusement gleamed in Obermann's eyes to match the

cruel uptwist of his slitted mouth. He was heavy, paunchy, and the duelling scar on his face added little to his appearance. He grinned down at the kneeling girl, apparently unmoved by her tears or by the loveliness of her suppliant figure. She was nude to the waist, after the native fashion, and her long black hair streamed down her shoulders to make an ebony cascade over the thrusting prominences of her breasts. Before Tim Hardesty could foresee the move, Obermann stung his fat palm across her face, knocked her sideways. "I told you I am through with you," he growled.

Hardesty said: "You Nazi swine!" and hurled himself at the heavier man; struck him on the jaw with a knotted fist.

Obermann staggered under the blow's force; righted himself and drew his Luger automatic. "*Herr Gott!*" he growled gutturally. "You dare strike a uniformed officer, you American dog?" His finger tightened on the trigger.

Teresa fastened herself on his wrist, deflecting the weapon. "No, my lover—no!" she whimpered. "You must not kill!"

By then, Hardesty had his own automatic out of its tied-down holster. "Better think it over, Obermann," he advised grimly. "I can shoot as straight as you can. Maybe straighter."

Obermann gave the native girl a shove. "Get out of here!" he snarled at her.

"Yes. I will go," she answered humbly. "But won't you please take me with you to Covenas?"

"Never." He pushed her from

the tent; turned to face Hardesty. "How dare you meddle in my private affairs?"

"I had no intention of meddling. I just don't happen to like seeing a man hit a girl. However, let's forget that. I've got news for you. Damned important news."

"So?"

"Yes. You can't take your soldiers away from camp. The Motilones are rising." Hardesty sheathed his gun. "One of our tractormen took an arrow in the back this morning. You know what that means. The savages are starting to snipe. The next step will be a full-fledged attack on us—in force."

"Too bad, *Herr* Hardesty. My orders are to ship my troop downriver today."

"If you do, my peons will refuse to work without protection when they learn the Motilones are on the war-path. The pipe line won't be finished by five o'clock this evening. My companies will lose forty million dollars."

"Your troubles are no concern of mine. I have my orders."

"Which have been countermanded by your superior officer, Coronel *Cabrozon!*" the American snapped. "He was killed by a Motilone ambush on his way here, but his daughter reached camp with the message."

Obermann seemed startled, uneasy. "Take me to her. I wish to see the official order."

THEY went to Hardesty's tent. Felizia Cabrozon lay on the cot, dry now, and clad in a shapeless frock of cotton print. Again Tim

Hardesty felt a surge of yearning as she sat up. Even in the formless dress, she was alluringly lovely. The cheap material could not deny the glorious rondures of her breasts, the slender enchantment of her figure. He had a sudden desire to touch her, and he clenched his fists to hold himself in check. "Felizia," he said woodenly, "I present Captain Obermann. Give him the written order commanding him to keep his troop here."

"But I have no written order. It was lost with the launch when my father was killed. I have only his word."

Obermann laughed sourly. "I take no verbal commands from women. Not even from pretty women, like the *senorita*. My troop embarks at once, *Herr* Hardesty." He clicked his heels, saluted mockingly, marched out.

Galled by the fellow's sneering insolence, Hardesty sprang after him. But just outside the tent he was blocked by Teresa, the tawny-breasted peon girl. "Let him go, *Senor* Hardesty. You are better off without the treacherous dog!" she whispered.

He tried to go around her. "His treachery to you doesn't count, now. We need him."

She wrapped her arms around his neck, fused her body to his. Her bare charms flattened on his chest and her lips went to his ear. "He is a traitor to you as well as to me. Later I will explain—"

Hardesty tried to wrestle free. For a moment his hands were on her golden shoulders in what might have looked like a caress. And Felizia Cabrozon selected that

instant to emerge from the tent.

She saw Hardesty apparently locked in Teresa's embrace, and she turned away swiftly, her dark eyes moist. Hardesty pushed the peon girl aside; followed Felizia into the tent. He grabbed at her.

She backed off. "So that is why you were not interested in me. You already have a woman . . . a native woman!"

"You're wrong!" he retorted hotly. "Teresa means nothing to me. She—"

"Save your lies, *Senor Hardesty*. I am not interested."

Angrily he caught her, drew her toward him. "I'll make you interested! I'll prove what I'm telling you!" he panted. And he kissed her on the mouth, prying at her lips until she moaned under the questing impact. His fingers traversed her shoulders; and when she tried to squirm from him, he could feel her swelling breasts brushing his chest, filling him with riptides of sensation. He tripped her to the cot; the cotton print skirt rucked upward to reveal tapered legs and lustrous thighs. The sweet vision inflamed his blood. He reached down to caress her.

"Let me go, you—you squawman!" she blazed.

AND then hell bubbled over in the clearing outside the tent. Peons began shouting, milling around. From the river, peanut-roaster whistles beeped as the three steam-launches drew away from the dock, laden with Obermann's soldiers.

Hardesty released the struggling Felizia; raced out to discov-

er the cause of the commotion. The launches were already headed downriver, while brown-skinned laborers gathered at the wharf in a yelling, cursing knot of hysteria. An American gang-foreman hurried to Hardesty. "Bad news, Tim. Somebody discovered a tractor-man up the trail with a Motilone arrow in him."

"Yes. I knew about it."

The foreman said: "The peons are scared gutless now that Obermann's troop has gone. We won't get our job done today, the way things stand. You know what that will mean."

"It will cost us the concession," Hardesty said grimly.

The foreman frowned. "Can't something be done, Tim?"

Interrupting his reply, someone plucked at Hardesty's arm. He turned and saw the native girl, Teresa, timidly demanding his attention. Excitement was in her piquant, stoic face. "Call the workers to order, *senor*. Let me speak to them. I can quell their fears!" she pleaded.

There was something in her manner that convinced him, caused him to obey. He leaped up on top of a pile of pipe, drew his automatic, fired it into the air. The native laborers turned, saw him. He waved them to silence. Then he helped Teresa up beside him. "If you've got anything to tell them, do it now!"

She surveyed the group below. "Listen to me, my fellows. You know who I am . . . or was. Yes; I was Captain Obermann's woman. And now I shall tell you about his treacheries. It was not a Motilone



Indian who slew that tractorman this morning. *It was Obermann himself!*"

The mob drew its concerted breath; stared at her in wonderment.

She yelled: "Obermann is a Nazi agent. He hoped to force the American oil companies to lose their wells, their pipe-line, their concessions! Knowing that he was to withdraw his troops on this, the final day of the contract, he murdered that tractorman with a Moti-

lone arrow. He wished to panic all of you; to frighten you so that you would not work without protection."

Hardesty grabbed her arm. "Are you telling the truth?"

She nodded and again raised her voice. "If the American companies could be forced out, Obermann hoped to grab the oil rights for his own country—his own dictator government! Will you then be fooled by this murderer? Will you be cowards, knowing that the Moti-

lone menace is false? Will you desert the Americans who have given you work, food, money?"

A few faint, half-hearted negatives came from the crowd. Then, as the roar swelled, Hardesty himself yelled at the workers. "On your jobs, everybody! There are ten white foremen to guard you—including myself. We'll be armed. No harm will come to you, I promise. Let's start laying pipe!"

HIS invitation bore fruit. A crowd of natives grabbed picks and shovels and machetes; others bent their backs under long lengths of heavy iron pipe. Hardesty leaped to the ground, caught Teresa in his arms as she jumped. On grateful impulse, he kissed her on the cheek. Then he plunged into a torrent of activity, dealing out rifles and bandoliers of ammunition to his Yank foremen; rushing to supervise the pipe-line job. The jungle resounded with peon chatter, the ring of tools against steel, the thwack of machetes against underbrush. A crew of American welders toted their torches and oxy-acetylene tanks from pipe-joint to pipe-joint, fusing the metal sections together as fast as they could be trenched and laid.

Noontime came under a roasting blast of tropic sun, but the work did not stop. A new oxygen tank was needed; Hardesty volunteered to return to camp for it, taking two natives with him. He stopped at his tent for a fresh canteen of water—and found Teresa there, waiting for him.

He was startled, having expected to find Felizia there. He eyed

the peon girl. "Where is *Senorita Cabrozon*?"

"I do not know, *Senor Tim*." There was something about her voice, some tonal quality, that told him she was lying. He had a sudden hunch that perhaps Felizia was in danger of some sort; that Teresa, for reasons of her own, was concealing something important. The native girl added: "Does it matter where the *senorita* is? Why should you think of her when I am here?"

Hardesty's eyes narrowed. "I don't think I understand."

"This morning, you kissed me," Teresa answered simply. "Now I am your woman. You must have no other."

He knew, then, that she really was holding back information about Felizia. He knew, too, that there was just one way to elicit that information from her. He forced a smile, took a forward step. "Yes," he said. "You are my woman. And as your lover, I demand to know—"

She was suddenly in his arms, clinging leechlike to him, jamming her tawny breasts against his chest. She raised her lips to his mouth, succulently parted. "You will be nicer to me than Obermann was . . ." she whispered.

He was human, and he was masculine, and there was something he wanted desperately to know. To gain that knowledge, he must play out the hand; it was not difficult, for Teresa was a blazing flame, and her nearness aroused him more than he had thought possible. His arms went about her body in a crushing embrace. He bent her

far backward; kissed the hollow of her golden throat. She sighed gustily. . . .

MOMENTS later, he whispered: "Now you must tell me about the *senorita*. I demand it."

Teresa raised herself languorously, stretching her arms above her head. "She—"

The tent-flap opened. Something twanged like a harpstring, and an arrow whined past Hardesty to bury itself in the peon girl's bare midriff. She screamed, doubled over, fell.

Hardesty said: "God!" and lunged from the tent, drew his automatic. He saw a brown figure scuttling toward the edge of the clearing—a Motilone warrior.

Rage clotted Hardesty's thoughts. He damned himself for having believed Teresa's story to the effect that Captain Obermann had killed that tractor operator in order to throw the workers into a panic. On the basis of that story, the peons had returned to work, thinking themselves in no danger of attack. Yet all the time there had been proof that the Motilones really were on the war-path. The attack on *Coronel* Juan Cabrozon's launch, for instance. . . .

Hardesty triggered his gun at the fleeing Indian. The savage threw up his hands and dropped flat with a slug through his shattered spine. Seeing no others, Hardesty leaped back inside the tent; leaned over Teresa. "Why did you lie about Obermann? Was it to get even with him for deserting you? Why did you lull us into thinking there was no real danger

of a Motilone attack?"

"It was . . . indeed Obermann who . . . slew your worker, my lover," she gasped. "If the Indians are attacking now . . . it is a thing I did not know about. . . ."

He had a feeling that she was telling the truth; that she would not lie when she knew she was dying. "What of *Senorita* Cabrozon?" he asked more gently.

"You . . . love her?"

"Yes."

The girl's eyes were wet. "It does not matter . . . now that I have tasted your kisses . . ." she whispered faintly. "You will find your *senorita* . . . in the jungle . . . she left camp an hour ago . . . I did not tell you at first, because I wanted you . . . for myself. . . ." Weakly she grasped his hand, pressed it under the tawny hillock of her left breast.

He felt her heartbeats slowing, and a wave of compassion filled him. "Poor kid!" he said softly, and he lowered his mouth to her lips. She sighed, smiled, went limp.

Hardesty leaped upright; there was no more he could do for the peon girl—and Felizia Cabrozon was somewhere in the jungle, perhaps already captured by Motilones. He raced across the clearing, calling her name.

He got a response, but it was not Felizia's voice. From somewhere down-trail, rifle-shots sounded. There could be but one interpretation of that staccato fusillade. Hardesty's pipe-layers were being attacked!

With a curse that was more like a prayer he went plunging along

(Continued on page 98)

By LEW MERRILL

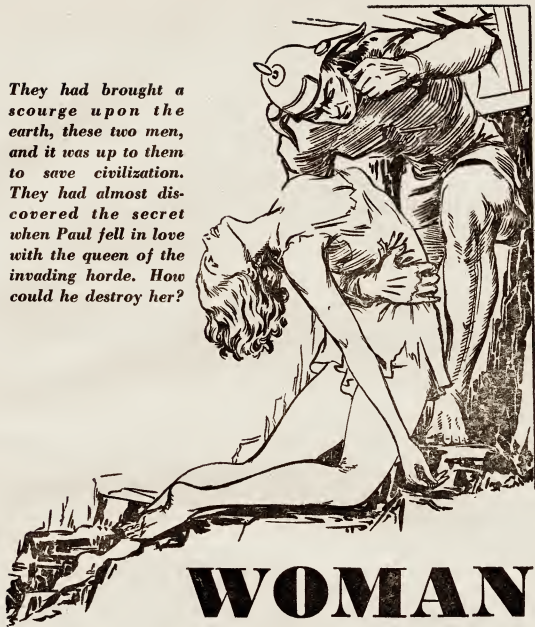
They were suffocating now, but the instinct was to run outside the cave to die. . . .



PAUL LEAVITT'S radio call from the vicinity of the United Space Airport was the first intimation that anything was wrong. It came from his licensed personal transmitter, and reached the *Times-Call* reporter who was assigned to that frequency.

"Something wrong at the Space

They had brought a scourge upon the earth, these two men, and it was up to them to save civilization. They had almost discovered the secret when Paul fell in love with the queen of the invading horde. How could he destroy her?



WOMAN from Mercury

Airport," said the editor. "Go out and see. Try to contact Professor Hartman."

Hartman was in the office of United Space headquarters with the superintendent. He could make nothing of Leavitt's message. "Everything was okay when we

landed from Mercury last night," he said. "Paul decided to sleep at the port. Probably a case of space-shock. Leavitt was acting a little queerly."

"Anything queer happen to you, beyond that difficulty in clearing Mercury, when your gravitational

warp calculations went astray?" asked the superintendent.

"Nothing that I can think of. But Mercury's a tough proposition. There's nothing there, not even fossil plant-life. And the temperature gets one, even through one's vacuum-shell. And that's not the handiest thing to go exploring in—a tin shell that would weigh a couple of tons on Earth.

"There was nothing out of the way, except that difficulty in taking off, and then our landing about two kilometers across the light line, in perpetual darkness. Maybe that got Paul's nerves—"

Hartman was visualizing as he spoke. As one of United's scientific staff, he had accompanied several of the pilots to Mars and Venus. He had made a reputation by his sensational landing on tiny Eros two years before. But Mercury was the *bête noir* of space travel.

Mars was bad enough, having no atmosphere. Mercury had one, but it was too rarefied to be breathable. And while one side, in perpetual sunlight, had a temperature six times the boiling point of water, the other, in perpetual darkness, approached absolute zero.

They had landed two kilometers inside the dark hemisphere, instead of on the narrow, twilight zone where the temperature was tolerable. They had struggled into the sunlight. Gone back to their ship, too, after a geologic survey. But there had been trouble taking off. And Paul Leavitt was high-strung.

Well, all pilots cracked up sooner or later, and Leavitt was close to the deadline of thirty. There

was no place for old men in the pilot service.

Hartman went up to the roof, where a number of old-fashioned gas-taxiplanes were resting with idle props. For cruising, nothing had been invented better than these machines of fifty years before. Hartman cursed softly. He had hoped to spend the evening with his girl, Norma.

HE WAVED away a chauffeur, and leaped into the pilot's seat, the reporter, who had followed him, jumping in behind. Hartman gunned the motor, and they swept out above the canyons of New York toward the north shore of Long Island.

Nothing seemed changed; planes were going their ways; beneath them, the lines of ground traffic were moving toward and from the metropolis. To the left the Sound lay like a sheet of blue glass. The airport came into sight, the immense landing-field, curiously hard, as if etched upon the face of the land, with its many buildings, and the lines of taxiplanes outside.

Then suddenly that hard etching was blotted out by wavering clouds that seemed to rise up from the ground, enveloping trees and buildings.

Hartman shot up, ruddered banked, cut his gun, eased out his rotors. The plane began to flutter down through the mist, which rolled along, heavy and sluggish, like vapor almost at the point of saturation.

"We didn't bring that back from Mercury," muttered Hartman.

As they landed, something came shrieking through the fog. It was

something that had been a man, and still resembled a man. But it was a living mummy-man. The skin was plastered on the face like some transparent tissue on a death's head. The thing was bone and skin. The clothing hung in tattered strips, dry as the centuries-old binding of a mummy's carcass.

The thing threw up its arms, plunged into the fog, and vanished.

Something plopped down from above and landed at Hartman's feet. It was a largish bird, a flicker, still feebly flapping with one bony wing. A shower of feathers strewed the ground. Hartman picked up a desiccated skeleton.

The reporter seized him and dragged him out of the line of a falling tree, which crashed down amid a shower of dried up leaves. The dried soil crumbled from the bone-white roots like sand. Other trees were falling.

Hartman saw the reporter gibbering, and heard a strange piping whisper come from his lips. Then a mighty hand seemed to constrict his chest. He drew in a modicum of unsatisfying air. And then suddenly he saw the panorama before him.

Through a rift in the vapor wall he saw the airport. All about the rim of the field were the bodies of dead men. In the hard light, it looked as if they had become skeletonized. And all about the field strange things were tumbling—things that might have been tumbleweeds.

Some of these things were globular, others elongated, like giant cucumbers. The longest were snapping into sections, and the sections kept on rolling.

One of these sections, comparatively near him, was budding limbs, and at the summit was the travesty of a leering human face. Clumsily the thing was raising itself to an erect position, while the short, sausage-like legs straddled for purchase on the ground.

Hartman, panting for breath, glanced at the newspaper man, and a cry, strangely thin, broke from his parched throat. For the reporter's face was growing skull-like, and his clothing was beginning to rip along the seams.

He grabbed the reporter and staggered back toward the plane. He forced his companion inside, and followed. He spun the starter. The engine coughed and died.

Then suddenly, out of the vapor, a crowd of creatures broke, men, women who clutched at children, cats, dogs, cattle. Gaunt, horrible, death-like things with horror in their staring eyes, and gasping mouths rimmed with livid, swollen lips. They saw the plane and rushed toward it.

"It's the Day of Doom! It's God's Judgment!" piped a gray-beard, clutching at the fuselage.

Suddenly the motor caught. The frenzied mob snatched at the two men and tried to drag them from their seats. Hartman battled with desperate resolution. The mob fought madly, but their clutching hands seemed to possess no power. The plane was kicking against the automatic brake-chocks. Hartman gunned her.

She started down the field and rose. Behind, the cluster of screaming humanity, trying to follow, arms upraised. . . .

Sitting in his cockpit, the

pinched ghost of a man, somehow Hartman managed to direct his flight. He was over the East River when a thought struck him like a thunderbolt.

"That swarm of glutinous stones—like snails—I saw on the space-ship," he whispered. "We must have—brought that back—from Mercury. I thought they—were aerolites that had adhered through—atmospheric pressure—and would roll off—in flight—"

WITHIN two days New York was depopulated. It was a city of the dead, hidden behind that circle of ever widening mist, in an inferno of alternating heat and cold that neither human being nor machine could face, except the space-ships, which could not be slowed down for investigations within that narrow radius.

There was no air in that inferno. Nothing could live in it. Vegetation vanished. Skeleton trunks of trees lay everywhere. Streams and ponds dried up. Even the bones of man and beast crumbled.

Perhaps half the population of New York succeeded in joining the horde of refugees that poured out along every artery of traffic. The rest died instantly as the inferno of heat struck them, in streets, in cellars, or among the pyramids of corpses outside the railroad terminals. The terror was advancing at the rate of about thirty miles a day, circling outward and always preceded by that cloud of sluggish vapor.

Within a week the main points outside the arc of the terror were Providence, Brattleboro, Troy, Binghamton, Wilkesbarre, Phila-

delphia. But every day the circle spread. The legislators at Albany, sitting to enact a law against the menace, died in their seats almost instantly.

Trains ran no longer. Ships fled to mid-ocean, to escape the terror. All life was disorganized.

Bombardment by heavy artillery proved useless. So did backfiring, spraying, and the digging of ditches. Congress appointed a committee of investigation, and Hartman and Paul Leavitt were summoned to appear before it.

It was proposed to ring the zone with pumps, to play compressed air upon the menace. "Let in air," was the cry, "and the plague will vanish." That fiery Southern Senator, Mr. Jackson Harrison Street, proposed to arm everybody with revolvers and send out the populace to shoot down the unseen invaders, who were described as man-cucumbers.

Paul Leavitt had escaped miraculously, burned, numbed, choked, dazed. He remembered nothing except stumbling away with his transmitter still on his chest, and trying to radio the warning.

Hartman accepted a post as scientific investigator, with the understanding that he was to have a free hand. Since there were a dozen other scientists at work, all with elaborate staffs, and all of them disliked Hartman, a mere exploring chemist, as they dubbed him, nobody bothered him. He and Paul disappeared immediately.

"We're going into the heart of things," said Hartman.

"In two-ton vacuum shells? They're bad enough on Mercury.

With an effort he
thrust the creature
into the safe.



On Earth we'd be crushed to pieces."

"I'll tell you my plans later. You've guessed what the trouble is, of course."

"It's something we brought back from Mercury, Bill?"

"I think so. I didn't tell those people all I've surmised. I don't think I should enjoy being lynched, Paul."

Paul grasped his arm. "If we can control the plague, don't you see we can gain all the power in the world?" he cried.

Hartman saw that Paul's nerves were still shattered.

HARTMAN, Paul and Sam Douglas headed for Lake Champlain. Sam was one of the Corporation's oldest employees, and the faithful old colored man had attached himself to Hartman in a personal capacity ever since his return from Eros, and refused to leave him.

In Northern New York State fruits were ripening in the fall sunshine, but the farm-houses were deserted, the cattle running wild in the fields. Ghastly stories about the "man-cucumbers" were circulating among the few who clung to their homes.

When they reached the lake, Hartman elucidated his plans to Paul.

"I've discovered one thing from the reports," he said. "The plague moves more slowly when it encounters considerable bodies of water."

He unfolded a map and pointed to an island near the northern border of the lake.

"That's the island, over there,"

he said. "I don't believe the monsters can dry up Lake Champlain. The centre of that island is a hundred feet above the water. That, and the heavy growth of timber, should protect us against any floods that they raise. We're going to burrow underground, with a glass roof and periscope."

"But where are we going to get our equipment?" asked Paul.

"It's coming from Montreal by truck. It should be here today. I've made all the arrangements."

Within two hours the truck arrived, driven by a fear-struck French Canadian, who could hardly wait until it was unloaded before scurrying back. There were a number of heavy cases, and the whole outfit was transported to the island in an old, abandoned flat-bottomed scow.

Hartman reckoned that they had three days before the plague would strike them. Actually there were five. Those were days of the most desperate kind of work, blasting the rock with atomite and constructing the dugout. Fortunately, four feet beneath the surface, they came upon a limestone cave, conveniently divided into two by walls of jutting granite. In the rear chamber, Hartman set up his laboratory. In front they placed their cots and their supplies.

They roofed the opening above with glass, through which the periscope protruded.

In answer to Paul's questions, Hartman explained.

"My opinion is that the invaders extract the oxygen from air and water. When they extract it, the volatile nitrogen and hydrogen are diffused into space, creat-

ing a vacuum. This diffusion of gases constitutes the vapor curtain that we have seen, while the lack of atmosphere accounts for the extremes of heat and cold, as upon Mars and Mercury."

"Then those—those things extract the fluids from human and animal bodies too?" cried Paul. "Oh God, Bill, those bones I saw—those faces! Do you think they are intelligent beings? How could we have brought them back with us?"

"Did you see those stones that we thought were aerolites?" asked Hartman. "We picked them up—as a dog picks up fleas. As for intelligence—I think they have an instinct, stronger and more dreadful than that of the insect."

"**WHAT** are they, in heaven's name?"

"Colonies of protozoans, as you and I and Shakespeare once were. Protozoa like the sponges, which feed on sea-water. These feed on oxygen. That's the only difference.

"Paul, do you remember the Greek legend of King Cadmus, who sowed a crop of dragon's teeth, from which armed warriors sprang? Perhaps a crop like that has been lying in the sands of Mercury since the days when she was a living, watered planet, with an atmosphere like ours, waiting for the chance to germinate. Seeds from Egyptian tombs are credibly said to have germinated, you know.

"Picture, then, another phase of human life. The life process has tried many experiments, from the tyrannosaur to the egg-laying mammals of Australia. Picture, I say, a human race developed, not

like ours, but by budding from the parent stock, as among plants, or by division, like the emeba. Buds, shriveled human buds, waiting to germinate in ages to come, when they find a more hospitable home, with a moist, oxygen-laden atmosphere.

"Picture such buds, I say," Hartman went on, "developing on earth with incredible swiftness, feeding on all the oxygen in the air, in the streams, in human and animal bodies, in the plants. They'd have a glorious time on Earth, wouldn't they? It would take centuries before all the oxygen had been extracted from the earth, and then—why, then they'd just shrivel back into their stone-hard pericarps to await the arrival of two more fools of space-explorers, aeons hence, perhaps from some planet not yet born, perhaps from Jupiter or Saturn, when they have grown cool and produced life and humanity—"

Sam, who had been dozing beside the two, outside the cave, sat up and rubbed his eyes.

"Glory Mighty, boss," he grinned, "us ain't afraid of dem conjurin' dirt-dobbers."

Then a yelp came from his lips. He leaped to his feet in terror as something crashed through the underbrush.

A girl was coming toward them. A girl in strips and tatters, through which could be seen the soft curves of her breasts, and the gleam of milk-white thighs.

Hartman leaped to his feet. "Normal!" he cried.

She tottered toward him. "I guessed you were coming up here," she said faintly. "You spoke about

—the island— at the north end of the lake. I've been walking—along the shore—three days—trying to find you, and—I'm hungry and tired, Bill."

Bill caught her in his arms and felt her slight body strain to his. For the moment he almost forgot the task that lay before him.

NORMA was sleeping in the front part of the cave; against the rock wall opposite Sam was extended, snoring. Hartman touched Paul on the arm. "I've got something to show you," he said. "One of those stones. It's changed into something else, I think.

In the rear of the cave, by the light of a lantern, Hartman saw a folding-table, rigid in its steel clamps, a circular bowl on a pedestal, and a dozen long copper cylinders. Hartman had unpacked the cases, which were piled against a wall. There was also a large safe of the octave-magnetic type, controlled by means of musical vibrations. A boy could have lifted it, but only a charge of atomite could have shattered it.

Hartman stepped up to it and touched the chord-combinder.

The musical note rang faint, yet resonant, through the cave. The thin sheet front vibrated; Hartman's finger touched the control-knob, and the front swung open. From the interior Hartman drew an elongated stone of a drab white color.

"Not much change yet," he said to Paul. "Look at those buds." He pointed to some excrescences, something like the knobs on a po-

tato. He set the stone down in the bird-bowl.

"God!" shouted Paul.

For the thing seemed instinct with life. It was moving, doubling over, growing soft and leathery.

"Light and atmosphereic oxygen—" said Hartman. "Incredible swiftness of development. I kept that stone in my pocket until—"

The thing was moving slowly around the bowl, rising erect upon one rounded end, flopping over, rising again. And it was growing, elongating. It was budding!

Four prominences appeared, two near the top, two at the bottom. The thing was elongating fast. Five toes and fingers came into view on a lower and upper limb. Then twenty grasping digits, created out of the amorphous, jelly-like substance that had broken through the shell, which now lay in chips about the thing.

Now the hideous caricature of a head was emerging. Each second showed some change. That mossy growth had a horrible resemblance to coarse hair. That cleft that opened across the face was the caricature of a mouth. And, from the sides of the head—ears! Two black specks, slowly being moulded by some invisible power into eyes!

"Paul, we've got to get it back! Shouted Hartman suddenly afraid of his own Frankenstein.

A scream came from the entrance to the inner cave. Norma was standing there, her hands clasped to her breasts. She screamed again, and toppled over in a dead faint. Hartman ran to her and caught her.

From every side the agglutinated balls came rolling downhill after them.



A raging thirst began to parch his throat. Before his eyes there hung a faint, nebulous wall of vapor. Beside him he heard Paul

gasping; in the outer chamber, Sam moaning in his sleep.

Hartman knew what was happening. The monster was drawing in all the oxygen in the cavern, to build itself into human form. He must get the thing back inside the safe, where, in the darkness, development might be suspended.

HE leaped at it and tried to gather it in his arms. It squirmed and writhed. It was like slippery jelly in his grasp, the body cold as a slimy snake's. From the mouth came a thin wail of protest, like the cry of a newborn infant. The stumps of limbs were not quite formed as yet, the muscles, flaccid, and, as it were, dumped onto the cartilaginous bones, squirmed like the tentacles of an octopus.

Hartman had the thing at the safe now. He tried to seat it on the edge of the shelf, preparatory to hurling it backward. The creature piped again, but with a more human cry, and the arms tightened about his neck.

The thing hung there with tremendous tensile strength, the child-length body swaying against his own, the arms cold from the reptilian fluid within them that had not yet turned to warm human blood. Shuddering, Hartman managed to look into the face by the light of the lantern.

Even as he looked into them, the features seemed to be forming. Two mournful eyes looked into Hartman's own. The face was no longer horrible or grotesque. Seen through a faint film of water-vapor, it was the face of

a whimpering, frightened child, clinging to him from love, for safety. The face of a thing aspiring to humanity, groping its way out of the unconsciousness in which it had lived. Even in his horror, Hartman was conscious of a feeling of pity.

Then suddenly the last stage came. Suddenly the arms about Hartman's neck grew warm. The body, tensed against his own, grew warm. And Hartman felt his strength leaving him, for he was holding a woman in his arms.

Nude, soft, and exquisitely rounded, with a flood of hair that swept between the curves of her breasts, and over her milk-white shoulders, she still clung to him. His fiercely drumming heart seemed to be pumping water through his veins. The thing was drawing him toward her, seeming to storm the citadel of his being, drawing him so that Norma was all but forgotten.

With a mighty effort, Hartman caught the creature in his arms again and thrust it into the safe, doubling it over so as to get it inside. It whimpered again. . . .

He flung it in with all his might. It toppled backward, and the wail was cut off as he touched the control-knob and shut the door. He found the chord combination, and from the timbre of the note that ran through the vault, he knew that the air had grown nearly normal again. He staggered toward the front of the cave.

Norma was lying where he had left her, her rounded limbs outlined beneath her rags. Beside her stood Paul Leavitt. He was staring at the safe, and there was

a singular look in his eyes. Suddenly Sam Douglas staggered forward, gibbering. Hartman pushed the negro away, and, taking up the dipper, took a long drink from the pail beside the pool of water in the limestone floor. But Sam still tugged at him and shouted in his ear.

"Sam, what's the matter with you?"

"They're comin', boss, they're comin'! Them damn dirt-dobbers! Lord help us, boss, they're goin' to eat us all up!"

STRIDING through the twilight, Hartman put up his hand to the glass skylight, and found that it was fogged with moisture.

He tried to clear a peep-hole, but the moisture, fluid as quicksilver, trickled between his fingers. Swirls of gray mist were passing overhead. Hartman thrust up the periscope tube. He could see the surface of the lake, and a patch of sunlight in the distance.

Again that raging thirst began to torture him.

Sam came staggering toward him. "Gimme a drink! I'm burning up!" the negro shouted.

Paul leaped toward Sam and snatched the dipper from his hand. "To hell with the water! Bring out the woman!" he yelled at Hartman.

He ran into the rear chamber. Hartman followed him. The lantern had gone out, but he didn't need a lantern. He was choking, dying, reeling and colliding with Paul and Sam. Hartman snatched up one of the copper cylinders,

which contained oxygen, and pressed the lever that unfastened the vacuum cap. There was a faint hiss as the gas escaped. Instantly he began to breathe more freely. For a while that would stave off death. . . .

Afterward, Hartman remembered going back again and again to open a fresh cylinder, as the old one became exhausted. Hours seemed to pass. Sometimes Hartman came back to himself out of a sort of coma, sometimes Paul was shaking him like a maniac and demanding the woman in the safe; sometimes he was trying to arouse Norma from the stupor into which she had fallen. Then he discovered that he was squatting on the floor, staring into the lower mirror of the periscope.

And then suddenly he saw the swarm!

Suddenly it flashed into his field of view over the lowered surface of the lake. The waters must have dropped several feet, exposing shoals and rotting stumps of trees. And the swarm came into view.

Caricatures of humanity, leaping over one another in the mud beside the shore. Things that might some day be human. Things released from Mercury, after aeons of slumber there, into a life that was as instinctive as the responses of the insect-playing in sheer exuberance of living.

Palsied with horror, Hartman watched them. He saw them scooping up fish, raising them to their shapeless mouths, impelled by the instinct to devour, and not knowing how to do so.

Rotund and globular and

dwarfed, and caricatures of man. Sporting and frolicking, they moved across the shoals toward the island. A creature leaped upon the glass roof and crouched there, peering down. Hartman could see the wise, inquiring little black eyes, the tufted ears.

Another and another leaped upon the glass, with soft, padded feet. One of them seized the periscope tube, and bent it double. Through the glass pane came the faint, piping chatter of the monsters.

The air was almost exhausted. The faces of the monsters, flattened against the glass, seemed the last things that Hartman was likely to see on earth.

One cylinder more—wasn't there one cylinder more?

Hartman reeled back through the opening. One cylinder of the precious gas remained. Hartman grasped it, and pressed the lever. He drew in a deep breath, and his brain began to clear. Then he saw Paul lurching toward him.

PAUL caught him by the shoulders. "I'm wise to you!" he shouted. "Wanted to get that woman and make yourself king of the earth. Open that safe! She's mine!"

His voice rose into a wild scream. "Open it, or I'll kill you!"

There was the strength of a madman in Paul's hands, as he grasped Hartman by the throat. Hartman fought desperately, but Paul was a younger man, and had three times his strength.

He felt himself choking. A cloud of blackness enveloped

him. "This is the end," was the last thought that flashed through his mind before unconsciousness supervened.

Paul flung the inanimate body to the ground, and a peal of insane laughter broke from his lips. In his crazed mind the idea persisted that Hartman was keeping the woman in the safe to make himself king of the world. The sight of the nude woman in Hartman's arms had aroused all the latent instincts of his nature. He turned to the safe, and began fumbling with the combination of musical notes that would loosen the magnetic tension that held the front plate rigid. The wave-lengths of the chord had to be in octave-relationship to the magnetic waves, to break that tension.

Paul had watched Hartman carefully when he opened the safe before, and felt certain that he could duplicate the movements of his fingers. Nevertheless, at each twist only a faint medley of discords was audible. Then suddenly the chord rang out, followed by the vibration of the metal as the magnetic tension ceased.

From within, Paul heard the thin, plaintive, piping note of the imprisoned woman.

"Three years space-chasing," snarled Paul. "They'd have turned me adrift next year. It's my turn now. You and me together, old girl!"

He leered at the vibrating door. Slowly he turned the control-knob. The door swung open.

An immense body seemed to be jack-knifed inside the safe. As the door reached its fullest ex-



Suddenly, out of the squirming mass of monsters, now an almost shapeless mass of protoplasm on the floor, there emerged the head and torso of a young man, striving for life.

tent, the thing tumbled to the ground, flinging Paul upon his back.

Paul struggled from beneath it. Then a cry broke from him. It was a nearly nude woman, more beautiful than any that Paul had ever seen before. Her hair, now fully grown, hung about her like a garment, and the perfectly formed breasts showed through the silky strands.

Paul had seen her before, but, in the darkness of the interior, had thought it was imagination. Now a flame of desire burned in him. His mind crossed the dark chasm between sanity and madness. They'd put him out of the Corporation, would they, because he was nearing the deadline of thirty! He'd show the world!

THEY stared at each other, the madman of Earth and the woman from another globe, another age. There was no longer a trace of the grotesque cucurbitaceous life about her. The cheeks and forehead were of palest ivory, the lips curved in what seemed to be a questioning smile. The dark eyes were fixed wistfully on Paul's face.

It was a human being looking back at him. It was humanity, reaching its goal of incarnation by another route than Earth. Not through the lemur, monkey, ape, not up from some marine organism, subsisting on plankton and crawling up between low and high-water marks, but through the vegetable world.

What did she know? Had she a mind? Speech? This woman of mystery, hatched from a small

gourd that had hardened into stone—had she a soul, or was she an automaton?

Paul put out one hand, parted the strands of silky hair, and touched one breast. Yes, it was warm with pulsing blood. "In God's name!" he burst out.

"In God's name!" The piping tones were a very parody of Paul's. He laughed wildly, and the woman's piping laughter answered him.

"We're going places, you and me!" Paul shouted.

"We're going places, you and me," came back the parrot-cry.

Suddenly a look of awful fury came into the woman's eyes. But she wasn't looking at Paul. Over his shoulder—at Norma, who was standing behind him, frozen with horror. She poised herself to leap, her haunches rippling with sleek muscle, her hair flung back, displaying the soft curves of her breasts and body. Arms went out taut. Paul caught her as she sprang.

Her arms went around his neck convulsively. Her lips sought his. Yet there was something in the rigidity of her that told Paul that the human way of love was unknown to her. To understand this would be to break the last barriers between the animal and vegetable kingdoms. It was Nature's legendary struggle, typified in the story of Eden—self-knowledge, the becoming as gods.

Suddenly Paul was aware of Sam shrieking in his ear, and tugging at his arm. "Boss, we got to git away!" he yelled. "Them dirt-dobbers is drownin' us!"

Paul realized that he was standing knee-deep in water. With a mighty effort he detached himself from the woman's clasp. He turned, and, in the dim light saw Hartman upon his knees, the water about his waist.

Hartman got up and ran toward the woman. Paul intervened with a snarl.

"We're gittin' out!" screamed Sam. He caught at Hartman, who seized Norma as she leaned back, half-conscious, against the rock wall. Paul picked up the Mercury woman in his arms and followed them.

IN THE front part of the cave the moonlight was streaming through the glass. The brilliance of the satellite, and of the stars, showed that there was practically no atmosphere. Inside the cave the last cylinder was almost exhausted. Death within and without—but the instinct of all was to rush out to die, rather than be suffocated like rats beneath the ground. Water was trickling through the cracks about the panes and periscope, and brimming up from the well. They were waist-deep now.

Sam scrambled up the rock ledges at the side of the cave, reached up, and drove his elbow through one of the panes.

It came down with only the faintest tinkle of shattered glass. There was not enough air to conduct sound. Then, with prodigious strength, the negro swung Hartman bodily up, and dragged him up through the hole.

With a wild cry, that sounded no louder than squeak of flitter-

mouse, Norma followed them. Paul, still carrying the woman from Mercury, forced his way up in their wake. And the five stood staring at one another—for they were drawing deep breaths of satisfying air into their lungs.

On Paul, this acted perhaps as a shot of insulin on the insane. He looked at Hartman in bewilderment, as if he had forgotten his attack on him.

Hartman seemed to have forgotten too. "I've got it!" he cried. "Don't you see? The swarm inhales oxygen only by day! By night it gives it out again. Nobody ever attempted to enter the zone of the pestilence by night." He grasped Hartman, who had set down his burden. "On Earth the vegetable organisms take in oxygen by day, manufacturing carbohydrates by the process of photosynthesis. By night they exhale carbon dioxide. There's a rhythm, Paul. We've got leeway till sunrise."

"Well?"

"We're going to fly to Washington and tell Congress of our discovery. And we're taking that—that—lady!"

His heart began to thump again, as he looked at the woman of Mercury in her nude loveliness.

"Glory Mighty, boss, I'm going to throw that dirt-bobber in the lake!" yelled Sam, approaching the woman with violent gesticulations.

"Dirt-dobber in the lake," she echoed.

"Shut up and keep quiet, or
(Continued on page 101)

Once An Outlaw—

By JOSE VACA

THE FAT and resplendent *policia del trafico* who directed traffic every day at the corners of *Avenida Cinco de Mayo* and *Paseo del Simon Bolivar*, as a usual thing had an easy job of it. True, the town of Ciudad Morales could boast of several hundred cars, but as these two resplendently named streets were little wider—and almost as dirty—as metropolitan alleys, his work consisted mainly of diverting wood laden *burros* and prod-

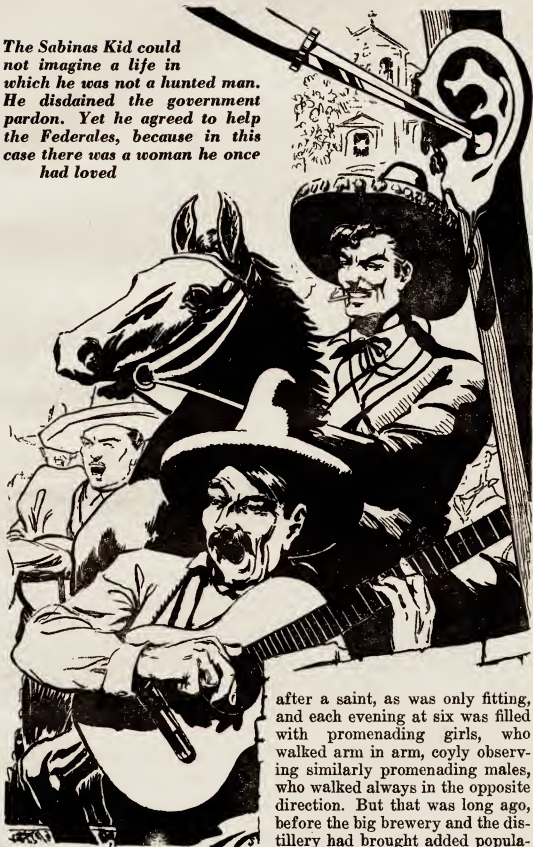
uce laden *carretas* at what he deemed the proper intervals. A block away, due south was the *Plaza del Mercado*, where the produce growers brought their fruits and vegetable, their eggs, their hand woven *sombreros*, and *huaraches* made from discarded automobile tires.

Once, this district had been the show part of *Ciudad Morales*. Then the plaza had been named

The policeman's eyes bulged. For behind the musicians rode a certain caballero upon a black horse!



The Sabinas Kid could not imagine a life in which he was not a hunted man. He disdained the government pardon. Yet he agreed to help the Federales, because in this case there was a woman he once had loved



after a saint, as was only fitting, and each evening at six was filled with promenading girls, who walked arm in arm, coyly observing similarly promenading males, who walked always in the opposite direction. But that was long ago, before the big brewery and the distillery had brought added population to the town, and it had turned

up its nose and moved away from the more squalid section that once had been its glory.

All that remained of the plaza's past glory was that part that was indestructible. True, the fountain still squirted a turgid stream of water in the center, where *polados* and *burros* alike quenched their thirst. And the Church of Guadalupe raised its greyness on the east side, and the *Banco Nacional del Morales*, secure behind its ramparts of gold, was still to be found on the west edge. It was out of the way, now that the town had grown away, but why should it move? Customers came to the bank, the bank hardly needed to go after customers!

On this morning, shortly after ten o'clock, the traffic policeman a block from the plaza, literally pricked up his hairy ears. For sounds were floating to him, sounds were emerging from the squalidness of the *Paseo del Simon Bolivar*. Music? At this hour of the morning? Guitars, and a violin, and a harsh voice singing Pancho Villa's old and famous marching song, *La Cucaracha*! Now the procession turned into his street, from a block down, and he could see them plainly. His eyes bulged! Unbelievable! Three guitarists, a violinist and a player of the harp! And behind them, a man on a black horse, clad as a *caballero* should be clad, with a silver decorated *sombrero*, velvet *charro* jacket, tightly fitting britches ornamented with a wide silver stripe and flaring correctly at the ankle.

The director of traffic could see these things, because as the procession came to his corner, he blew

his whistle and held up his hand, although at the time there was absolutely no traffic coming from the other direction! Thus he was also able to see that the rider lolled in a richly carved saddle resplendent with silver *conchos*, with carved *tapaderos* to match. And when he pushed back the *sombrero* the policeman gasped, certain then that it was an illusion. For the smiling lips were jovial beneath a waxed mustache, the nose above the mustache was aquiline, like the bill of a hawk, and the eyes that danced so merrily on either side of that thin bridged nose were jet black, like basalt!

QUICKLY the traffic policeman crossed himself. Perspiration stood out on his forehead. He wanted most of all to run, to run anywhere at all, only away from here! For already his horrified eyes had caught sight of the gold mounted revolver hanging in its holster on the rider's right hip! With terror he noted that the gloved hand rested also on the rider's right hip, so very near the revolver butt! And so easily he observed that the smile of amusement was fading from the rider's face as the music came to a close.

A musician, evidently the leader, turned to the rider, said, "*Otro, senor?*"

The rider, never taking his black eyes from the trembling policeman, answered, "*Por supuesto! La misma! Certainly, the same!*" And to the quailing policeman, "*Pues, que paso, gordo?*"

Gordol! This one had called him *Fatty!* But at that the policeman deemed himself lucky. For the life

of him all he could think to do was to blow his whistle vigorously and turn his fleshy body, gesturing for the procession to come on. The musicians lifted up their voices, and sang of snatching the whiskers of Carranza to make a hatband for Pancho Villa. The broad velvet back of the rider presented a tempting target, but the policeman only groaned. There, he told himself, rides one hundred thousand pesos and I am afraid to collect!

He hurried a half block down the *Paseo del Simon Bolivar* into a *botica* and rang his superior on the phone. "With *Jesus* as my witness, on the head and beard of my father, I swear it, *mi capitan!* With these eyes I saw him, Jose Maria Gardinia Guedea, the Sabinas Kid!" He listened for a moment, growing a pale yellow color. Twice he protested. At last, with the look of a doomed man, he said, "*si, mi capitan*, even if I go to my death! I will watch the front of the *banco* until he emerges! But help you will rush to me at once, much help?"

He went out into the sunshine. Walking slowly down the street, he felt like a man ascending the steps to the gallows. From the far side of the plaza he could see the black horse the Sabinas Kid had ridden, standing at ease before the bank itself! That one! To ride into *Ciudad Morales* in broad daylight, to go into the bank! Doubtlessly he was in there even now, cutting the ears from the cashiers, and the book keepers, dropping gold and paper pesos into his great morrals! That, decided the policeman, called for a drink. Anyway he could go into the nearby *cantina*

and reinforce his courage with a *copita* or two of *tequila!* Perhaps he might even be able to keep watch from the *cantina!* After all, he was a family man, and he valued his ears greatly.

THE *Banco Nacional*, in spite of its out of the way location was modern, from its great time-locked vaults to the president's secretary. She was as pert, as rouged, and as shapely as any president's secretary to be found north of the Rio Bravo! Except, perhaps, that she was old fashioned and romantic enough, as *Mexicano* *senoritas* sometimes are, to thrill at mention of the name tossed at her by the *caballero* who strode so magnificently into her severe anteroom. She returned from her employer's office with flashing eyes and provocative lips. She touched her shiny black hair with her polished nails, knowing the upward movement of her arm threw her peaked and pointed breasts into silhouette. She even sighed a bit deeply as she said to the Sabinas Kid, who sat nonchalantly on the edge of her desk, that *Señor Valdez* awaited him.

"*Señorita*," said the Kid gallantly, "I can see a banker any time. You—you are rare! Like a gem. Your name I do not know, for me, Jose Maria Gardinia Guedea, the Sabinas Kid,—I shall always call you *Diamantita*, a little diamond!"

It was more than the girl could stand, more than she had hoped for. The most sung about man since the great Pancho complimenting her thus! She swayed toward him—and evidently he was

expecting it. His hands swept her closer to him, flattened her body so tightly against his that she could scarcely breathe. Before closing her own eyes she saw the white gleam of his teeth, the flash of his black eyes. Then there was only the aching pain of his lips on hers, the sweet pressure of his mighty arms and the hot surge of blood in her veins. . . .

SEÑOR VALDEZ was a banker who believed in promptness. The Sabinas Kid had been expected promptly at ten. He was fifteen minutes late. He had been announced, had been told that Valdez and Coronel Roque Reyno, of the government, awaited him. And still he did not enter the office. Famous man or not, who was this outlaw, this *bandido*, to keep honest men of business and government officials waiting? Señor Valdez hustled to the door and opened it.

The Sabinas Kid was doing a very thorough job of kissing the Valdez secretary. Somehow, in the struggle, the secretary's blouse had slipped from a shapely shoulder, the upper slope of one satin skinned breast was partly exposed! The short skirt had crept stealthily upward until a halo of similar satin shone resplendently above the silk of her stocking. Señor Valdez, being a Latin, had often imagined himself doing this same thing, but with the shoe on the other foot, cold anger flooded his fat being.

At his oath of surprise, little Diamantita, startled, managed to pull away. Valdez glared at her, he glared at the Kid. He said, "Se-

ñor Gardinia, we await, and we are busy."

The Sabinas Kid laughed. He said, "I too am busy, little man of the tremendous paunch! *Vamos, pronto!* I come when my business is ended!" And before Valdez' horrified eyes he drew Diamantita back into his arms and proceeded with the pleasant business of kissing her thoroughly and well!

TWENTY minutes later, in the private office, observed by two pair of inquiring eyes, the Sabinas Kid finished reading the letter. The letter was signed by a great man of Mexico, and it bore not only an official signature but an official seal. He said, "Let me see if I have this straight. For the past three months a gang of counterfeiterers have been gyping the *Loteria Nacional*, the national lottery. I do not understand how this could be done."

The slim man with the cadaverous features, who had been introduced to him as Coronel Roque Reyno, gestured impatiently. "Through the use of clever plates, *hombre*, and clever timing, and clever distribution! A man of infinite talent has made the plates, has collected similar papers and inks as those used by the government. Suppose, let us say, these tickets are run off, leaving the number itself blank. Suppose—and this is the only way we can figure it—that through the use of radio, perhaps one of what the *gringos* call "ham operators" that winning numbers are flashed on the air as soon as they are drawn."

"Cabron!" said Diamantita. "Unfaithful dog—I should cut your throat!"



The Sabinas Kid nodded, his eyes shining.

"Already," went on Roque Reyno, "these blank tickets have been distributed to many parts of Mexico. Evidently the holders, those in this so terrible band of thieves, have been provided with numbering machines which print a similar number, that is a similar type and size, used by the government. The

number is inserted quickly! When the winning numbers are officially announced, the member of the counterfeiting gang goes to the bank and collects!"

The Sabinas Kid nodded. "And there are a hundred ways he could find if that number had been paid at the particular bank where he called! Why, if the plates and printing and numbering were good, the scheme is wonderful—providing of course they were content with the smaller prizes!"

"And that," put in Señor Valdez, "is what they have been doing. Smaller, yes, some ten thousand pesos being the largest counterfeit ticket as yet turned in. But, my friend, when you consider how many banks in the Republic of Mexico pay off on lottery tickets!" He made a gesture with his fat hands, made a resounding poof with his fat lips.

The Kid took the letter in his hands again. He read aloud. "—and because we know your knowledge of the *Mexicano* underworld cannot be rivaled, we are willing to grant you complete amnesty for your past misdeeds if you will help us bring these miscreants to justice. On the day that you give our representative, *Coronel Roque Reyno* the plates themselves—as well as some proof that this gang is broken up—we are prepared to hand to you, your full and complete pardon for all crimes against the government. During the interim, you are not to be bothered by police or *Federales*. *Coronel Reyno* has your permit to come and to go as you please. He also has your pardon—to be handed to you when the thing is broken."

He folded the letter and laid it carefully on the desk. He leaned back and closed his eyes, murmured, "To be unhunted! To enter a city as I please, to stay as long as I please, drink where I would, sing where I please—and as many *señoritas* as I please!"

Valdez curled his lip. "You agree, then, *Señor Gardinia*?"

The eyes snapped open. "Of a certainty, no! Why should I? I do those thing now! Go and come when I please! Do as I please! Who touches me?" He glared at the *coronel*, as if challenging him, his gloves now in his left hand, his right hand close to the butt of his gold mounted gun.

ROQUE REYNO smiled. It was like the grin of a death's head. He said softly, "*Señor Kid*, I think I understand. You are a lone wolf, you have no more use for criminals than I have. But," the thin shoulders shrugged, "Official freedom means nothing to the wolf who evades traps derisively." The Kid grinned. Like a wolf. "So, knowing that, unofficially, I am prepared to do this." He extracted an immense wallet. "Here," he said, laying a folded paper on the desk, "is the pardon you disdain. Here is something you may better understand." Slowly, one at a time, he laid a pile of bills atop the pardon. "Fifty thousand *pesos*, *señor*. Suppose we leave these with *Señor Valdez*, to be turned over to you when you give satisfactory proof that your job is finished."

The Kid leaned across the desk and extracted a cigarette from the banker's humidor. He lit it, trickled smoke through his nostrils.

"And my safe conduct, *señor*, for the next few days."

Reyno tossed a paper across the desk. Without reading it, the Kid thrust it into his pocket. Reyno said, "We have reason to believe that somewhere in this very town the printing is being done. You will have no trouble—"

"And your credentials, *Señor El Coronel?*" There was a cold menace in the Kid's voice, but Reyno did not lose his smile. The wallet came out.

"You will understand, *amigo*, that my value as an undercover man is lost once my identity is positively known? Here are my papers, let them be between you and me and *Señor Valdez*."

The Sabinas Kid glanced through the commission, the appointment as a government agent. He said, as if unwillingly, "Enough, I suppose, *Coronel Reyno*, yet there is no description. There is not even mention of your ear!"

Reyno flushed, his skinny fingers flew to his right ear. The ear was lobeless, seemed to be whittled down, disappearing into a broad white scar that ran as far as the corner of his thin mouth. "An honorable wound of battle, *señor!*" His eyes blazed.

The Kid grinned. He shrugged. "*No importa*," he said carelessly. "Perhaps it is only that I am a connoisseur of ears that I noticed."

The light on the annunciator flashed on Valdez' desk. He flipped the button, said, "Yes, yes?"

An excited voice came back, "*Señor Valdez*, there is one here with the ticket on yesterday's

drawing numbered 174390! And already we have paid the ticket, or a similar one, not fifteen minutes before. What do I do?"

The Sabinas Kid rocked with laughter. He said, "And the forgeries are so good that you cannot be positive whether this is the real or the false!"

Valdez glared at him. "Twenty thousand pesos," he said grimly.

The Kid snapped, "Tell your cashier to stall the ticket holder. I want to have a look." He was out the door before the fat banker could turn to the annunciator! Diamantita leaped to her feet, her eyes suddenly hot. He blew her a kiss as he swept by her, went into the marble corridor, opened the door and peered out. The clerk was explaining volubly to a woman that due to certain formalities it would be a few, oh a very few moments before the ticket would be honored. If the *señorita* would but be patient?

The *señorita* evidently did not like to be patient, but she shrugged philosophically. As she turned and sauntered away from the window, the Kid's brows knit. There was something—? He opened the door wider. She neared the window. The bright sun shown through that window with the power of many candles. The *señorita* wore a simple white dress that proved no obstacle to the rays of the sun whatsoever. It might well have been cellophone. The Kid smiled; he appreciated femininity, when represented by a small waist, lyre like lips, tapering thighs and breathlessly shaped legs ending in spike heels. Even if the heels were a bit shabby and the dress that

covered the figure a bit shoddy. She turned in semi-profile, so that the Sabinas Kid caught the honey color of her hair, the determined chin, the full lower lip. He knew her!

A MOMENT later he was at the check table that stood in the center of the room, writing rapidly on a deposit slip. When she turned from the window and neared the table, he looked up, looked her directly in the face. For a moment he thought she was going to speak. Then she read aright the look of warning on his face, and though it could not stop the flush that spread over her own features, she did not speak. She paused, looked impatiently at the teller's window, then glanced down at the deposit slip.

It said, "Have you forgotten me? Please, *corazon*, do not give me away. Meet me two hours hence, wherever you say, wherever it is safe for me."

He turned his back deliberately. Abstractedly she fumbled with a pen, did a few curleyeues, as a waiting and impatient person might, then rapidly scrawled an address. She whirled, casting the pen aside, hurried to the window. The Sabinas Kid folded the paper and thrust it into a pocket, moved out of the lobby, barely hearing the clerk's obsequious apologies for the delay in cashing the ticket and his equally obsequious promise that the money would soon be forthcoming.

In the office Valdez snapped, "Well, you have seen this counterfeiter? You have advice, yes?"

The Kid did not even answer him. Instead he looked at Reyno.

"My pardon, *señor*?" The cadaverous one indicated the paper and the pile of *pesos*. "And you have given Valdez the instructions, that I am to have the *pesos* and the pardon the moment I deliver proof to him that I have broken up these miscreants, the moment I bring to him the so clever plates?" Reyno nodded.

Señor Valdez snapped, "Enough! Now about the one who waits?" But the Sabinas Kid would not be interrupted.

"I am to be in complete charge?" he insisted.

Again *Coronel* Reyno nodded.

"But," said the Sabinas Kid regretfully, "how do I know that *Señor Valdez* is to be trusted?" The fat man swelled like an angry toad. The Kid raised his hand, beamed. "That is sufficient! You will burst your paunch, little fat man. And even bankers have ears, so you will be honest!" The banker blanched. Few in northern Mexico but knew the dreaded mark of the Sabinas Kid! The earless corpse!

"You will pay the lady now at your window," instructed the Kid. "And you will send a *mozo* to care well for my horse. It is likely that I shall take a cab, which you must call at once! Now wait five minutes, then pay the ticket, and watch for me to report shortly."

"But how do we know we are paying a counterfeit or a genuine ticket?" wailed Valdez. "The first of this number might be the genuine! It might be the—"

But the Kid, with a grin and a wave of his hand, was gone. He paused in the anteroom. Diamantita eyed him with flashing eyes

As Janice came in, Diamantita landed on the floor with a thud.



and pouting lips. "I saw, *perfidó!* That blonde one in there! You, pretending, yet you make the note for her, no doubt you make the as-signation! The colorless, skinny bag of flour! I claw out her false and fickle eyes!"

The Kid laughed. He liked the tiger in woman. She stood facing him with her fingers curved like talons, her eyes flashing, her pointed breasts rising and falling deeply, her skirt clinging to the fullness of her hips. "Diamantita," he sighed, "I go! Duty calls. But tonight, little gem of I hope not too much purity, you will meet me at nine o'clock, at the *Club Retiro!*" His fingers slid beneath her arms, he lifted her from her feet, brought her close to him. She closed her eyes, her red lips parted. And he set her down again, waved a hand and went through the door, leaving her staring angrily after him.

THROUGH the lobby of the *Banco Nacional* went the Sabinas Kid, paying no attention to the nervous blonde in the revealing white dress. He stood on the steps of the bank, a magnificent figure, twirling his pointed mustaches. Across in the plaza, the director of traffic — still unreinforced — was cooling his hotness — resulting from five quick shots of *tequila* — in the fountain. He swung back behind the stone, the liquor giving him a false courage. His fat fingers fumbled at his gun.

The Kid twisted and lighted a cigarette, waited impatiently. A taxi whirled around the corner on two wheels, the door flung open. Still the Kid waited. The door opened behind him. *Coronel Rey-*

no stood there, smiling. He did not speak, he did not look at the Kid. Suddenly, "*Ten cuidado!* Look out!" Reyno's left hand almost pushed the Kid down the steps, his right hand appeared miraculously with a gun. At the same instant a shot rang out, from the plaza fountain, the lead ricocheted off a pillar and screamed its way up the street. The director of traffic, misguided one, had tried to earn himself one hundred thousand pesos.

Now like a frightened rabbit he scurried across that crowded plaza. The Sabinas Kid and *Coronel* Reyno watched him go, each helpless in spite of the gun each held. For the plaza was too crowded to risk a shot.

The Sabinas Kid's eyes glowed. He said, "I thank you, *señor*. The Kid does not forget."

"*Es nada,*" said Reyno shortly. At that moment the blonde, who had collected 20,000 pesos on ticket 174390 hurried out of the bank. Glancing neither to right nor left she turned up the *Avenida Cinco De Mayo*, her trim hips swaying as her heels hit hard on the cobblestone pavement.

The Sabinas Kid got into the cab. "Slowly, *amigo,*" he grinned at the driver. "We follow the *gringo señorita*, and at a safe distance. From time to time we will circle a block. No?"

"Si," growled the driver, and wheeled his cab.

The American *señorita* seemed to have much shopping to do. She stopped at a food store, at a clothing store, at a meat shop, emerging from each with packages. By now the Kid seemed to have lost much interest in her. Instead he watched

the driver. "*Hombre*," he said at last, "how is it that your face is not that of the picture on the driver's license?"

The man grinned. His face was round and dark, deeply pockmarked with blue, as if a gun had exploded too near to it. "I drive for my friend, *señor*," he explained, "my friend who is ill." The Kid was leaning far forward. Suddenly the cab came to an abrupt halt, stopped by a pompous traffic policeman. The Kid seemed to shoot forward in his seat, throwing out his hand to restrain himself. The hand missed the back of the partition, shot through the opening, grazed the driver's head, knocking off his cap. By the time he had picked up the cap and turned to curse the Sabinas Kid, the Kid was back in his seat, offering a thousand apologies. As the traffic director signaled to come on the Kid drew a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his hand. The blue powder marks on the driver's face were grease paint!

The *señorita* eventually turned into the rattle trap Hotel Lavaca. The Kid gave her time to disappear, went into the desk, hurriedly wrote, "Janice Blue" on an empty envelope and waited while the oily clerk thrust it into the proper box. Janice Blue was in Room 204.

THE next stop was a haberdasher's, for the Kid realized he looked much too conspicuous in his *charro* costume. He went into the store, and there in the shadowy interior, whirled to watch his driver. Now the Kid had explained that he would be inside perhaps all of twenty minutes. So hardly had he

entered when the driver left his seat and hurried to the corner cigarstore. Moments later he emerged from a phonebooth to find the Kid leaning nonchalantly against the counter smoking. The driver's face blanched.

The Kid smiled. "*Amigo*," he said softly, "you know who I am, no?"

The driver nodded. "Come," said the Kid. "There is a *cantina* on the corner that has a rear room. We shall go there and reason, you and I. Spies I do not like!"

The driver's face blanched. He saw the long brown fingers hovering close to the gun butt. "No, no," he whispered. "I will tell you! It was the man at the bank, Reyno! He have me come in the cab to take you where you would go!"

Anger swelled in the Kid's breast. Reyno! After he had given him a safe conduct! After he had promised him cooperation, every means! But there was no need to vent his resentment on this poor underpaid spy of a fellow. He dismissed him with a curt nod.

He spent the intervening hour and a half busily. He bought a complete outfit of clothing, being sure that the coat was amply big to conceal the gold mounted revolver beneath his arm. He walked to the center of the town, where the towering Federal Building overlooked the central plaza. There he spoke boldly to the lieutenant at the gate. He even invited him across the street for a little *aguardiente*—which turned out to be quite a lot, rather than a little.

"Roque Reyno?" laughed the lieutenant. "Of course! He and I

have been like this!" He crossed his forefinger and second finger, lifted his refilled glass. "So you know him, too! Let us then, *amigo*, drink to Roque!"

The Kid laughed, lifted his glass. Afterward he said musingly, "I have not seen him for years, old Roque. I suppose he has lost weight by now! And for the head of a cow I cannot remember his nickname!"

Again the glasses were filled. The jovial lieutenant said, "Lost weight? That fat boar? Never will he lose weight! And as for his nickname, how could you forget? *Zurdo!* He of the left hand!"

WHEN the Sabinas Kid walked into the designated meeting place, a barnman polished the bar before him, said, without looking at him, "The *señorita* waits, *señor*. The third door on the left." The Kid left a five *pesos* note on the bar, walked warily down the snelly hall to the third door on the right. His hand was on his gun as he noiselessly twisted the knob, stepped out of line and flung the door wide. Years of being sought sharpened his senses, he took no chances.

Nor was the room empty. The shutters were closed, a candle flickered on the table. And in that dim light he saw Janice Blue. She arose to meet him, her eyes shining, her hands outstretched. She whispered, "Pepe! Pepe! To see you again!"

Now, once, not so long ago, the Sabinas Kid had run away from this woman, not so much for his own sake as for hers. That was in Mazatlan, on the west coast. He

had been able to do a service for her and for her father, a dissolute English remittance man, Jeffrey Blue. And intimacy had grown, not alone from the gratitude she felt, but because both were magnificent specimens of their own races. The Kid, a hunted man, with a price on his head, knew a marriage with this English girl would be a hell on earth for her, though she was willing to follow him wherever he might go. Except for one thing. Her father.

Jeffrey Blue at one time had been an artist of promise. An unfortunate love affair, after the death of his wife, combined with other serious blows, had turned him into an incurable dipsomaniac. When sober, Jeffrey Blue was the exiled Englishman, kind to his daughter, thoughtful, polite, repentant. When drunken, he was literally a conscienceless fiend. He had been known to sell the shirt off his back for a *litre of tequila!* And knowing this, Janice Blue, even though she loved the Sabinas Kid, could not go with him when he fled from Mazatlan with the *federales* at his heels.

"Pepe! Pepe!" she whispered again. He met her in the middle of the room, met her with arms that swept about the soft contours of her lush body, flattened those same contours against his own muscles. Her arms were about him, she strained to him until she felt the mad pounding of her heart echoing against his, beat for beat. His lips on hers . . . his hands. . .

She pulled away. "We mustn't," she said. He shrugged, rang the bell that summoned the waiter and ordered *habanera*.

They sat together on the divan speaking of old times in Mazatlan, careful not to touch on their once flaming love.

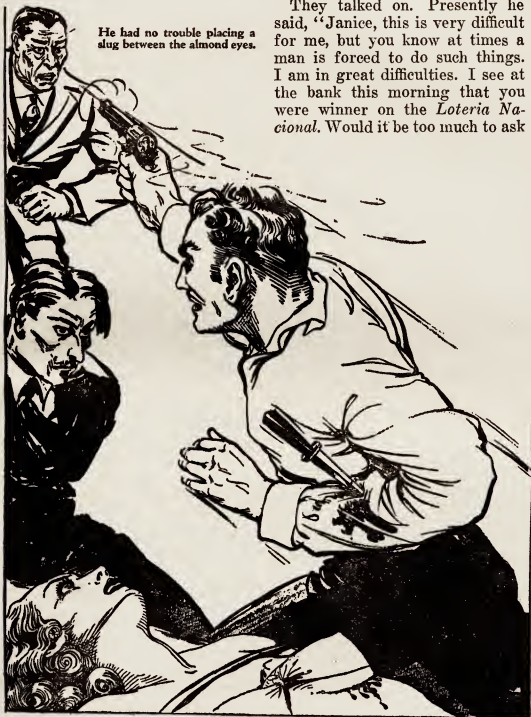
"And your father?" he eventu-

ally asked in a casual tone. He felt her soft body tense beside him, sensed the lie before it was uttered.

"My father," she whispered, "is in the states. I join him there presently."

They talked on. Presently he said, "Janice, this is very difficult for me, but you know at times a man is forced to do such things. I am in great difficulties. I see at the bank this morning that you were winner on the *Loteria Nacional*. Would it be too much to ask

He had no trouble placing a slug between the almond eyes.



the loan of five thousand *pesos* for a few days?"

She looked at him in astonishment. The Sabinas Kid borrowing money? The Sabinas Kid, who used that gold mounted gun to obtain what he would have? His face, however, was innocent.

She said, "Why, Pepe, I am sorry! I owed that money, truly I did. I have paid it out, already!"

He knew that for a lie, too. Her eyes would not meet his. He gathered her into his arms, and she forgot everything else. . . .

LATER, he drank, and looked down at her. He reached for her bare white arm, his forefinger touched the angry black and blue bruises. In spite of her resistance he turned her, touched similar bruises on her velvety shoulder blades.

"Your father," he challenged. "You claim he is in the states. These are his marks—or the marks of another man!"

She began to sob, to weep so convulsively that her breasts trembled and rode and fell spasmodically. "There is no other man," she said softly. But he could not touch her again. When she stood at the door, she was again Janice Blue, proud and defiant. "All right, Pepe," she said, "you caught me in a lie. Perhaps I had reason to lie. I love my father."

"And your father," he said softly, "is in great trouble. Is it not so? You are afraid for him!"

"So afraid," she answered, "that I will not even let you see him!"

Then she was gone.

At the bar, where he paused for

another drink, a small hand whirled him about. "*Cabron!*" said Diamantita, her eyes flashing. "I should cut your throat, you unfaithful dog!"

The Sabinas Kid laughed, picked her up bodily and carried her into the same room he had vacated. "I suppose," he laughed, looking down at her, arms akimbo, "that *El Coronel* sent you too?"

She looked puzzled, reached into her blouse and extracted the deposit slip he had written his note upon at the Banco Nacional. "This," she said, "I took from your pocket at the *banco* when you bade me goodbye! Unfaithful one!"

He stopped her indignant words with a kiss. Presently she said, "Oh, I made it my business to find out about that one, that sack of flour. She has a man! She lives at the Hotel Lavaca, and she is seen in the cafes with Ramon Torres, that aviator who was thrown from the army for gambling! She is his woman, I tell you!"

The thought ran through his mind—had Janice been lying about those bruises? Was her father really in the states? Could another man—?

"But you, little gem, you are no other man's girl," he breathed. Tenderly he slid the blouse from her shoulder, leaned and kissed it. He sank down on the same divan, pulled Diamantita down beside him. To hell with Janice! She drew away from him long enough to murmur, "*Señor Valdez*, he has given me the afternoon off, *corazon!*" Then nothing else mattered. . . .

AROUND three that afternoon Janice Blue alit from a car before the same *cantina*. Pausing not at the bar, except to note that the man she sought was not there, she hurried down the squalid hall, threw open the door and paused on the threshold, her body stiffening.

The Sabinas Kid lolled at ease on the divan, the girl he called Diamantita on his lap. Her dress was well up in her lap, revealing silken knees and jewelled garters. It was hot in the room and her discarded blouse hung over the back of a chair. Seeing Janice, the Kid sprang to his feet. Diamantita lit on the floor with a resounding thud. Janice, scorn and nausea on her face, started back down the corridor. The Kid seized his hat and coat, sprang through the door in pursuit.

It took him a full five minutes of firm argument to get her troubles. "It is my father," she finally wept. "They have him! They must have him! Ramon and I have searched every *cantina* in town for him! He took the money from me, the lottery money, and now he is gone! I tell you *they* have him and you must help me, for they will torture him to death!"

Ramon, she had said. Ramon Torres? And when they reached the Hotel Lavaca, he knew it was so. The aviator awaited them in Room 204! Scarcely did he glance at the Kid. Instead he seized her hands, drew her to him and tried to comfort her. "Do not fear, little one, do not fear," he soothed her. "We'll find him! I tell you we should have flown away days ago, when we first arrived, but we were

moneyless, I know. But do not worry. We will find these men and make a deal!"

The Sabinas Kid felt out of place. True, this man had been dishonorably discharged from the army, but who is there without fault? The girl was the daughter of a notorious man; she, too, had lived hard. And somehow the Kid knew that what she felt for him was something entirely different from that emotion that flooded her being when young Ramon Torres held her in his arms! He shrugged. There were always, he told himself philosophically, the Diamantitas! "And now," he told them finally, "if you can break off enough to tell me how I may be of use—?"

IT TOOK, perhaps, ten minutes to get the story. Jeffrey Blue, had been an etcher and engraver of marvelous ability before drink threw him. Jeffrey Blue had made the plates for the counterfeit lottery tickets! He had kept that knowledge from his daughter as long as possible, but at last she had become suspicious of his source of money. And in a drunken moment he had told her what he had done.

She knew then that she must somehow get him out of Mexico. She knew the gang, once they were through with him, once the big cleanup was made, would assassinate him. Young Ramon Torres, the flier, had been flying the counterfeits all over Mexico for the gang. The girl, casting scruples aside, had deliberately set out to make the susceptible young Latin her slave. And had succeeded beyond her furtherest hopes.

(Continued on page 108)

**By WILLIS
VACHEL KEITH**

FIRE

WHEN he heard the mournful, fog-hushed whistle of the Singapore boat, Steve Hunter rose from his desk in the Banda Island office of the Dutch East Indies Gold Mining Company, donned a slicker, and stepped out into the soupy drizzle.

Meeting the island steamer was usually an event, but this time he had no stomach for it. Adolph Vevera, the company manager, had died suddenly of a fever and his adopted daughter, a Nanking mission-school teacher, was on the boat, expecting to take his body back with her. Unfortunately there was no body. Too late Steve had learned that government regulations demanded immediate cremation. To make matters worse, the Singapore office had notified him that Max Hauser, a new manager, would be on the boat.

At the dock he elbowed his way through the crowd of Malays and Chinese to where the gangplank would be lowered. Papa Van Buckholdter, rotund, white-haired Government Resident, was already there, waiting for his official mail pouch and attempting to converse with Dr. Pederson, the island's health officer, who was three sheets to the wind in anticipation of a shipment of whiskey.

The stern of the chunky, iron-hulled steamer had already been

warped in and McPherson, its red-bearded skipper, was standing at the port rail bawling for someone to cast a bow-line.

Steve looked up as a man and woman came out on deck and moved to the rail. The man was tall and heavy-set with beady eyes and thick, loose lips that seemed to be molded out of wet putty. His big, flat head with close-clipped blond hair was hunched into his shoulders like a turtle's. Steve shifted his attention to the woman and his breath choked up in his throat.

Her full, bowed mouth was blood-red and beaded lashes rimmed dark, exotic eyes. She wore no hat and her raven hair was drawn away from her face and tied in a tight, intricate bun at the nape of her neck. A sheer white silk dress clung to the curves of her voluptuous figure, cutting under high, firm breasts and outlining the sweeping arch of her hips. The skirt was almost knee-length and as the bow of the steamer swung in, her dress fluttered in the breeze and Steve could see the woman's shapely legs and glimpses of ivory thigh above the taut, gartered tops of her stockings.

McPherson bellowed an order and the gangplank swung down. Steve looked up again. The heavy-set man had disappeared but the

Hauser, the new Banda Island manager, had no business inflaming the superstitious natives—particularly when he was putting two beautiful women in danger. But Hauser was contemptuous of native gods—contemptuous until the gods themselves took a hand in the matter!

MOUNTAIN



"Get out!" Hauser ordered, brandishing the gun.

woman was still there, leaning over slightly so that her breasts half rested on the wooden rail. Her eyes, dark and sensuous, met Steve's for an instant and he could have sworn her carmine lips smiled. Then she was gone and McPherson waddled down the gangplank carrying Papa Van's mail pouch and shouting greetings. Steve drew him aside.

"That dark woman who was at the rail, Mac. Is her name Vevera?"

"Hell, no! She's Hauser's wife. Not bad, eh?"

"Wife?" The company radio-gram hadn't mentioned anything about Hauser bringing a wife. "Is—is Miss Vevera on board, Mac?"

"Yep. Kept to her cabin pretty much. Say, that Hauser dame is all right. A young buck like you—"

STEVE saw them coming down the gangplank and broke away. As he drew closer, he knew that distance hadn't lent enchantment. Hauser was ugly with his under-slung jaw and tiny eyes, but his wife was stunning. Every square inch of her body seemed to move under the clinging silk dress with nothing to impede it. Steve began to feel the nineteen months he had spent on Banda Island. The roof of his mouth went dry and his temples throbbed. He had all he could do to introduce himself and when she slipped her cool, tapered fingers into his moist palm and smiled, the nineteen months seemed like ten years.

"We'll go right to our residence, Hunter," Hauser said.

Steve tore his eyes away from

the brunette's exquisite form. "I—I have another passenger on board. Mr. Vevera's daughter came on from Nanking."

Hauser's soft, unpleasant face darkened. "What am I supposed to do, stand on this filthy dock until she's ready to get off?" He gestured irritably. "Have someone else take care of her."

Steve kept his voice down. "There isn't anyone else. Mr. Van Buckholdter, the Resident, is going over toward your cottage. I'll ask him to escort you." He brought Papa Van over and introduced him.

Hauser pointed to two large trunks and some hand baggage on the dock. "I want all that brought to my quarters, Hunter. At once!"

"I'm afraid it won't fit. Space is limited. We have a tool-shed and—"

"You heard me, Hunter!" Hauser growled. "Have it brought to my cottage!"

Steve glanced at Papa Van and the Dutchman's eyes mirrored amazement. "Yes, sir," he said, fighting down the desire to bury his fist in Hauser's ugly face. He watched them walk off the dock, his mind an angry whirlpool. Who in hell did he think *he* was, anyway? Fat, blubber-mouthed pig! Why, for two cents the company would take their lousy job and stick it—"

"I—I beg your pardon," a still, small voice at his elbow said.

STEVE turned and looked into eyes that made everything else seem unimportant. They were blue, but like no other blue he had ever seen. Tear-stained, they

shimmered with all the faceted radiance of star sapphires, eclipsing the loveliness of a pert little nose and strawberry lips, all of which was crowned by a wealth of golden hair.

"You're Nan Vevera!" he blurted.

She nodded. "Y-yes, I am. Are—are you Mr. Hunter?"

Steve blinked. He had expected horn-rimmed glasses, severely tailored clothes, and whatever else went with a mission-school teacher, not a blue-eyed blonde whose small, rounded bosom, rising and falling under the bodice of a simple cotton frock convinced him she wasn't a day over twenty.

"I'm Steve Hunter," he said dazedly, remembering what he was going to have to tell this slip of a girl.

"I can't begin to tell you how much I appreciate your notifying me, Mr. Hunter," she said.

Steve took her arm. "We'll go over to the Resident's bungalow." He left orders for Hauser's luggage to be carted from the dock and led Nan Vevera across the flat toward the group of seven cottages that made up Banda Island's white settlement. The rain had stopped and the fog was beginning to lift. "I'm afraid I've brought you over here needlessly," Steve said. He went on to explain the sanitary regulation and when he mentioned the cremating of the body, he felt her quiver. "I can't tell you how sorry I am."

She looked up at him, her eyes tear-flooded. "I understand the reason for it and—and I'm glad I came. I've always wanted to meet you and see the island. Dad wrote

so much about it and—and you."

She was taking it like a major, even smiling through her tears. "You're swell," Steve said. "I've arranged for you to spend the night at the Resident's cottage. He has an extra room. You'll be more comfortable there than on the boat. They load with nutmeg and mace during the night and the screeching of the winches is enough to keep anyone awake."

She laughed and wiped her eyes and by the time they reached Papa Van's cottage her face was animated again. In a few minutes the genial Resident appeared, muttering under his breath. "Ach, dis new manager I do not like, Stevie."

"Well, he's a Dutchman, Papa Van. Hauser is a Dutch name."

"He iss not Dutch, Stevie."

Steve happened to glance at Nan Vevera. The pupils of her eyes were glittering strangely. "Is something wrong?" he questioned.

She paled and looked away. "Er—no."

He knew she was concealing something because her breathing had quickened and her breasts were agitated. Why should it have made a difference to her whether Hauser was Dutch or not? "I see Pederson got his whiskey," he said, watching the bibulous health officer and McPherson carrying a case over to the white shack that served as hospital and residence for Pederson. "That'll hold him for a week or so." His eyes shifted to Hauser's cottage where two Malay boys were struggling to get the second trunk through the narrow doorway. They managed it, somehow. He turned to Nan. "I'll

show you the mine before darkness sets in."

THE words were scarcely out of his mouth when all three of them heard a shot. Steve ran to the door. Hauser was standing on the porch of his cottage, leveling a smoking revolver at one of the Malay boys who was running across the flat. The other boy had crumpled at the steps. The revolver thundered again and the second boy stopped dead in his tracks, hung for a moment like a marionette, then pitched forward on his face.

"Get Pederson!" Steve shouted to Papa Van, dashing out. He reached the boy who had fallen on his face, turned the slight body over. The eyes were open and fixed, the mouth agape with blood trickling out of one corner. Pederson could do nothing for him. He was dead. Steve hurried to the crumpled figure at the steps but there was no need to touch it. He could see the gaping bullet hole at the back of the shaved head.

Hauser came to the front of the porch. "I caught the black devils trying to open one of my trunks! Get their filthy carcasses out of here, Hunter!"

Steve looked beyond him to the door of the cottage. Mrs. Hauser was standing there in negligee and underthings, her hand at her throat and the under-surface of her arm pressing against a full, net-cupped breast. Her eyes were frightened.

"Get 'em out!" Hauser ordered, brandishing the gun.

"This may cause trouble," Steve said. "We're five or six whites

against a thousand Malays and Chinese. You can't go around shooting them down." He pointed to the cluster of native shacks adjacent to the mine. Half-naked men and women were congregating in a clearing. "See that?"

"To hell with them!" Hauser rasped. "I'm running this outfit and I'll shoot down every last one of them if I feel like it! They can't steal from me!"

Papa Van arrived with Pederson in tow. The physician looked at the two bodies, shook his head and stumbled back to his cottage and the newly arrived case of liquor. Steve explained what had happened. The Resident shook his white head.

"No, id iss impossible! Nefer do dey steal! Vot goot vould id do dem?"

"I said I caught them trying to force open one of my trunks!" Hauser's eyes were like pin-heads of fire. "Do you think I'm lying?"

"Dey do not steal!" Papa Van insisted doggedly.

STEVE watched the clearing in front of the native shacks. The men had separated from the women and were coming toward Hauser's cottage in a solid phalanx of brown bodies, each with the curved bone handle of a *kris* protruding from his cotton *sarong*. Hauser saw them advancing and his loose cheeks twitched.

"Keep them back!" he shrieked. "I'll shoot them!"

Steve stepped up on the porch. "Give me that gun, Hauser!"

"No! Stand back, I tell you!" The revolver shook in his fat hand. "Stand back or—"

Steve lunged at him and his right hand whipped out, balled knuckles catching Hauser flush on the jaw. It was a knockout blow, timed to perfection and with every ounce of the young assistant-manager's muscular body behind it. Hauser went down and the gun clattered on the porch floor.

Steve dropped off the porch and faced the kris-armed Malaysians led by the giant, Samu, the one native on the island who spoke a smattering of English. They seemed to know, instinctively, that both boys were dead, for their women, back in the clearing, wailed horribly.

Steve pointed to the bodies. "Take them, Samu, and go back."

The huge brownskin shook his head. "We take bad *tuan*, also.

"No, Samu. *Tuan* did not mean to kill the boys. It was an accident. Go back!"

Samu translated and an angry rumble ran through the solid knot of natives. Brown fingers tightened about kris handles. Steve heard a woman's choked cry and he turned his head. Nan Vevera was standing a little away from the cottage, her cheeks ashen and her eyes bright pools of terror.

Samu advanced and the natives followed him. "Bad *tuan* die for kill!" he muttered.

Steve knew what they wanted—Hauser as a human sacrifice on the funeral pyre of the dead boys. He would have let them take him if he felt certain it would stop there. But it wouldn't. That much he knew. Half-savage, they would become drunk with power and the women would be in danger. Hau-

ser's wife with her sleek, full-breasted figure, and Nan.

He pointed suddenly to the fog-rimmed mountain peak in the distance. Gray smoke curled up from its volcanic peak. "*Gunong Api* will say if *tuan* is good or bad, Samu! *Gunong Api*!"

The Malaysians fell back and all eyes turned to the volcano. There was a moment of dreadful silence before Samu spoke. Four men came forward, lifted the bodies, and carried them away. The rest followed.

Papa Van mopped his brow. "Ach, Stevie, like a miracle it was!"

STEVE walked over to Nan Vevera. "You had no business being here. If trouble had started—" The adoration in her eyes stopped him short. Suddenly he felt the desire to hold her close and press his mouth down on the soft, moist loveliness of her lips and feel her young, firm body against him.

"I—I was afraid for you," she said softly. "Those horrible knives!"

He touched her arm and a warm wave passed over him. "You'd better go back to the cottage with Papa Van and *stay* there. There's no telling what may happen unless Hauser, himself, straightens this out with them. I'll see you later."

Mrs. Hauser came out on the porch, still in her negligee, kneeled beside her husband, and mopped his face with a wet cloth. Walking up the steps Steve could glimpse the deep hollow of her breasts where the brassiere cups were

joined. Again his mouth went dry and his temples pounded.

"He'll be all right," he said. "Let me get him inside." He dragged the lumpy, inert body to the sleeping porch at the rear of the cottage, stretched it out on a bed. "I'll send Dr. Pederson over to look at him."

Mrs. Hauser followed him to the front room, crowded with both trunks and the hand baggage. The front of her robe hung open. "You were very brave to face them as you did," she said, moistening her lips.

Steve tried to keep his eyes away from her warm, ivory-tinted flesh but it drew them like a magnet. Each breath she took swelled her bosom and filled the net cups of the brassiere.

"Which trunk did the boys try to open?" Steve questioned.

She came closer to him. "I don't know. I was in the back room at the time."

Steve laid a hand on one of the trunks. "The lock on this one is broken."

She forced her supple body between him and the trunk, gripped his shoulders. "Don't touch it! He'll kill you if you do!"

The robe was gaping now and her almost naked warmth pressed against Steve. He felt the roundness of her full bosom against his chest. She was breathing heavily, her parted lips close to his mouth.

Steve looked into her eyes. The pupils were bright and dilated with eagerness. "What do you mean, Mrs. Hauser?" he asked. "What's in the trunk that's so valuable?"

Her hands slid down his arms.

"Nothing. Really nothing." Tapering fingers caressed him sensuously. "I wish you'd call me Leona."

THE woman was a tramp on the face of it but that made her no less attractive. Nineteen months without seeing a white girl was a long time. Too long. His eyes swept over her. What the hell, she was practically throwing herself at him.

"Will you call me Leona?" she murmured, the tip of her tongue slipping redly between her moist lips.

Steve's arms went around her. There was no need for him to bring her closer. Her body swayed and her hands slid up again, locking at the back of his neck and guiding his mouth to the carmine moistness of her parted lips. No kiss had ever been like this one. It seemed to drain the blood from his veins and leave something molten in its place. He pressed his hands against her back, maddened by the tremor that rippled through her lithe body. She was driving him crazy. All the natural desire that had been dormant for so long welled up within him like live coals fanned by a bellows. His heart pounded against her yielding breast and his brain was on fire. She leaned back and the robe slid off her shoulders, baring the silken lustre of them.

It was then that Steve heard the rhythmic beat of tom-toms and the high, shrill cries of frenzied savages. He broke away from Leona's embrace and stepped to the door. Darknes was falling and in the twilight haze he could see the

"I'm running this outfit!" he snarled.



massed natives on their knees facing the mountain peak. One of their number, wearing a grotesque head-piece, danced weirdly in the half-light.

Leona Hauser's hand dropped on Steve's arm. "What is it, darling?"

It was strange, but now the very sound of her deep, passionate voice repelled him. He shrugged her hand off. "You'd better get your husband up. Tell him to meet me at the Resident's cottage."

"But—but you can't leave me this way!" Her parted lips trembled and her eyes were dark pools of eager supplication.

Steve looked at her flaccid, sensuous mouth and wondered how he had brought himself to kiss it. The robe dangled from a loose cord tied around her waist and her body was the body of a cafe girl in a Singapore dive. Without another word he pushed the screened door

open and hurried across the flat to Papa Van's cottage. The elderly Resident and Nan Vevera were on the porch, watching the strange ceremony of the natives.

"You know what it means, Papa Van?" Steve commented.

"Yah, I know."

"What *does* it mean?" Nan questioned.

Steve pointed to the volcano peak silhouetted against the eastern sky. "That's *Gunong Api*—Fire Mountain. Malaysians worship it. They're praying to it now, probably asking for Hauser's death. You'd better go back to the boat. You'll be much safer there in case we have trouble."

"What sort of trouble?"

Steve hesitated. The ruse he had used—telling the natives the sacred volcano would decide whether Hauser was guilty or not—was bound to have repercussions. They would see some sign in the drifting smoke to mark his guilt. When that sign came, it would mean *Gunong Api* desired a human sacrifice—a live body hurled into its pit. That body would be Max Hauser's.

"There's no telling," he replied in response to Nan's anxious query. "In any event, the boat's the place for you. I'll get McPherson to go on board and keep steam up."

Nan shook her head. "I'm not leaving you alone, Steve."

"I won't be alone. Papa Van and Pederson and the Hausers will be here with me. I can't let you risk your life."

"It's my life and if I want to risk it I will!"

Steve turned to the Resident.

"You can order her off the island!"

Papa Van shrugged helplessly. "Nobody could order a woman, Stevie. Maybe she has a reason." His eyes twinkled. "Maybe she will eggsplain."

"There can't be any explanations! The chances are we'll all have to evacuate. I've got ten thousand ounces of gold in the office that *must* get on the boat before this thing breaks and I can't waste any time." He faced Nan. "Are you going on board or aren't you?"

Her blue eyes met his unflinchingly. "Not without you."

"All right, you're remaining at your own risk!" The door slammed behind him.

AT THE company office, Steve inspected the locks on three iron-bound cases of gold bullion, affixed shipping tags, and was about to walk to the dock and get some of the boat's crew to help him transport the precious metal, when the office door opened and Max Hauser came in. The right side of his jaw was blue and swollen and his small, sunken eyes were inflamed. He carried the gun with which he had shot the two Malay boys.

"Put that gun up!" Steve snapped. "Haven't you caused enough trouble with it?"

Hauser snarled deep down in his throat. "Don't tell me what to do! Where's the gold?"

Steve motioned with his head. "In those cases. I'm getting it on the boat before something happens."

"Like hell you are! That gold stays right here!"

"But it has to be shipped anyway. We might just as well put it aboard."

Hauser's mouth twisted in what was meant to be a smile. "It's not being shipped. Where's the Vevera girl?"

"In the Resident's cottage."

"That's fine." He leveled the gun at Steve's chest. "Now, listen to me. You and the old man and the doctor are leaving the island on the seamer at once! I'll take care of the girl."

Steve stared at him, dazed and bewildered. "You're mad!" he blurted. "The natives will kill you instantly if they know you're here alone!"

"Don't worry about me. I won't be here long enough for that and in the meantime this little peashooter will stop them. Get a move on! We'll round up your pals and see you on your way to Singapore."

Steve stood his ground, trying to figure it all out. It didn't make sense no matter how he looked at it. The gold bullion was ready for the boat. Why didn't Hauser want to ship it? And why did he want Nan to remain on the island?

"I'm afraid I don't get the point," he said. "The bullion belongs to the company and should be safeguarded."

Hauser snickered. "Not any more it doesn't. It belongs to me. So does that little blonde. I like her looks"

Steve stiffened. Now he understood. "You can't get away with anything like that, Hauser!"

"No? We'll see. Get your hands up!"

Steve raised his hands as the gun menaced. Quickly he measured the distance between Hauser and himself. He knew the risk he ran of stopping a bullet but it had to be taken. There was more than the gold involved now.

"Let's go!" Hauser ordered. "One bad move and you won't live to get off the island!"

Steve started for the door. Suddenly he turned and sprang. The gun roared and he felt the impact of lead as it struck his chest. It seemed to stop him dead in his tracks. He could see Hauser's ugly, twisted face in front of him and he tried desperately to propel his body forward so that he could reach it with a clenched fist but his legs became water weak and all the strength drained out of his body. He fell heavily to his knees, a milky haze forming over his eyes. Through it he could see Hauser looming over him. The haze deepened and became stygian darkness.

THERE was no pain, only an empty dullness. Steve opened his eyes. A group of indistinguishable faces were looking down at him. Gradually they took shape and form, became faces he recognized. Papa Van's and McPherson's with its flaming red beard. Pederson with blood-shot eyes and a weak mouth.

"Flesh wound," Pederson said thickly. "Missed everything and went clean through."

Steve remembered then that Hauser had shot him and all that preceded the shot was clear and

sharp. "Pretty damn' lucky," McPherson said.

Steve passed a hand over his heavy, tired eyes. Something seemed to be throbbing like a giant piston and the bed he was stretched on rolled from side to side sickeningly. He realized, suddenly, what it was. He was aboard the island steamer! He forced himself to sit up, brushing away McPherson's restraining hand.

"Where's — where's Nan . . . Miss Vevera?" he questioned fearfully.

Papa Van turned away. "Hauser kept her on the island," McPherson answered. "He forced us on board at the point of a gun. He thought you were dead so he let me and Pederson take your body."

Steve went cold. "And—and you left the girl there?"

"What else could we do? I figured we'd make the run to Singapore and get help."

"How far are we from the island?"

"Five miles."

Steve swung his dead legs to the floor. "Turn back! I'm going ashore for her!"

"No, Stevie," Papa Van cried. "Dis Hauser iss a madman!"

"I said turn back!"

McPherson tugged at his beard. "I'm not docking there, Steve. He's got a machine gun and he'll blow us all to hell!"

"You don't have to dock. I'll swim in."

"With a bullet hole in your chest and a million sharks in the water?"

Steve's face was white. "Don't stand here arguing with me! Turn back!"

He stood at the rail with Papa Van and McPherson as the steamer hove to a half mile from shore. Pederson had plugged the bullet wound with cotton dipped in alcohol and it drew with a steady, gnawing pain. "This is as close as I'll take her," McPherson said. "You can't swim it. Look at those sharks."

A half moon had broken through the thick sky and in its light Steve could see the dark fins of hungry man-eaters cutting through the inky water. Once he had watched a native tip over in a canoe. By the time help reached the poor devil, there was nothing left but a mangled torso.

"I'll take a life boat," he said.

THE dull boom of ceremonial tom-toms floated from the island. "I will not let you go alone, Stevie," Papa Van said.

McPherson drew a deep breath. "I'll row him but I won't go ashore. Hauser's got a machine gun and we've got nothing but our bare hands. It's suicide!"

"I'll take that chance."

With the skipper at the oars and Steve on the stern seat the small boat headed for Banda Island. Smoke from the crater of Fire Mountain drifted lazily across the moon. At the dock, McPherson tied to a pile. "You're taking an awful chance, boy."

Steve climbed up on the dock. "Wait here for me." From where he stood he could see the huge funeral pyre the natives had built. They were grouped around it, chanting a monotonous dirge. Lights flickered in Hauser's cot-

tage and the company office but the rest of the island was dark.

Crouching low, Steve headed for the office. It was empty but the three cases of gold bullion were still there. He started toward the manager's cottage only to pull up short when a ghastly human moan came out of the darkness ahead of him. He waited and listened. It sounded again, a cry born of horrible pain. Peering into the night he made out a figure dragging itself across the flat laboriously, inch by inch. It was a woman with dark, blood-matted hair hanging over her pale face—*Leona Hauser!*

Steve reached her side, dropped down on one knee, and supported her head against his crooked right arm. What he saw turned his stomach. Her right breast dripped blood and a livid streak across her left temple at the hairline indicated where a bullet had creased her skin. She was gulping air as though it were difficult for her to breathe and her lips were beginning to turn blue.

"What happened?" Steve questioned anxiously.

Her eyes rolled. "He—he shot me . . . wanted . . . other woman."

Steve knew she was referring to Nan Vevera. Hauser probably had her in his cottage at this very moment. There was no time to waste. He lowered the manager's wife to the ground, realizing that she was bleeding to death from the wound in her breast; that he was powerless to help her. But before he could go her clawed fingers clutched his arm.

"Wait!" she gasped. "He . . . is . . . not . . . Max Hauser! My

. . my husband is . . . is dead . . . in the . . . the trunk!"

SHE spoke in a half-whisper, forcing each word from her parched lips as though she realized her time was short. The story she told was one that made Steve's blood run cold. The man who was masquerading as Max Hauser, her husband, was, in reality, a German, Franz Schmitt by name. He had made ardent love to her and talked her into helping him murder her husband in order to get to the large supply of gold bullion he knew was on Banda Island. The deed had been done in Singapore and Hauser's body stuffed into one of the trunks. The second trunk had a built-in short wave radio sending set with which Schmitt planned to communicate with a hired fishing boat which would pick him and the gold up.

As he listened, Steve understood why Schmitt had pumped bullets into the two native boys. Evidently one of the trunks had opened while they were carrying it and they saw the body of Max Hauser.

The mortally wounded woman's voice drifted off into nothingness as she came to the end of her dying confession. Her body stiffened suddenly, quivered as though an electric current were passing through it, then went limp. Steve placed his hand on her breast. There was no heartbeat. She was dead.

CROSSING the flat, Steve approached the lighted cottage where he was certain he would find the murderous impostor and

(Continued on page 114)

STAKES on

They had mistaken him for the King and there was no way he could convince them he wasn't. And for a little while the fate of France was in the point of his sword.

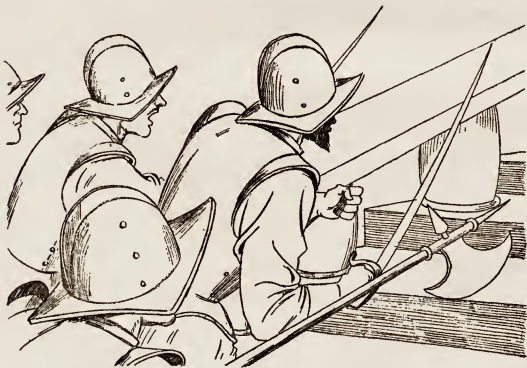
FRANÇOIS, the young Sieur d'Alembert, crawled out from beneath the pile of cauliflower in the market-cart and looked about him. Paris was atwinkle with lights, but the market was very dark, and there was no further need of the disguise of the unsavory peasant's smock, which François flung from about him.

Now he stood revealed as an elegant gallant in wine-colored doublet and stout jerkin, his rapier by his side. He laughed, for he had assured King Henri of Navarre that it would be child's play to enter Paris with his message to

Mademoiselle d'Estaing, in her big Hotel.

Easier to get in than to get out again, perhaps, he pondered, as he still stood looking about him. Especially since François knew nothing of what was afoot, and could form innumerable surmises.

Certainly it was known that Mademoiselle d'Estaing was on extremely friendly terms with the Duc de Mayenne. And she had come stealthily to Henri's camp outside the walls by night, and there had been a long confabulation, and, though pretty women were irresistible to Henri, it didn't seem to have been a love tryst.



the BLACK

By HUGH SPEER

"We fight to the death!"
Crillon roared.



This was after Henri's victory at Ivry had made him master of all France, with the exception of rebellious Paris. In the capital the Duc de Mayenne ruled, with the aid of the Catholic League, and the Committee of Sixteen of the parliament. And nothing but Henri's acceptance of the Catholic faith could give him Paris—unless he were willing to do a thing that would be abhorrent to every Frenchman, and take the city by storm.

What, then, had been the cause that had brought Mayenne's friend, the lovely golden-haired owner of the great Hotel d'Estaing to Henri's camp by night, accompanied only by that dark, pretty maid of hers?

After the women had departed, young François, being on guard outside the royal tent, had heard Henri and his boon companion, the swashbuckling Crillon, storming and swearing at each other within; then Henri had come out and caught François by the shoulder, and roared:

"A short time ago I heard you complaining of lack of action, my young spark. Now here is action for you. Get into Paris tomorrow night, go to the Hotel of Mademoiselle d'Estaing, and tell her that we play the black, and not the red. Go in one of the market carts that we permit to enter after nightfall, or borrow a pair of wings and fly, but see that you hurry back with Mademoiselle's answer!"

TWIRLING his moustaches, which he had allowed to grow, as much as Nature permitted, after the fashion set by Henri, young

François proceeded to orientate himself. He knew where he was, of course, though he had not been in Paris since his boyhood. Here were the *halles*, the markets along the bank of the Seine; in the moonlight he could see the great façade of Notre Dame looming up further away. And the first of the great hotels a little back from the shore was that of Mademoiselle d'Estaing.

Occupied more with preserving his red leather shoes against the mire than with any thought of danger, François proceeded toward his destination. Suddenly flambeaux flared on either side of him, and a dozen men came running at him with cries of "Curfew! Curfew!"

François cursed his evil luck, which had brought him into contact with the patrol. These men—archers, as they were still called, though they were presenting harquebuses at his chest and head—were one of the nightly bands sent through the city by General Grommeyer, in charge of the policing of Paris.

In imagination he saw himself within the grim confines of the Saint-Lazare. The truth would have to come out, and, in the embittered state of religious wrangling, his death as a spy was a foregone conclusion.

The best he could hope for, as a member of the lesser nobility, was death by the axe, instead of being broken on the wheel.

This realization burst on him even as the yelling troop came charging forward from both sides. François threw up his left arm in a motion of surrender, then, duck-

ing low, ran headfirst into the nearest flambeau-bearer, knocking him down and extinguishing the torch.

At the same instant, the two parties came into near-collision, and harquebuses were hastily averted.

This was François's moment. With a slash of his broad-bladed cavalry sword, he cut in two the breastplate of the officer who was in his way, sending him to earth like a tortoise clashed from its shell.

INSTANTLY he was running like a hare toward the looming bulk of the great medieval hotel, with the patrol giving full cry behind. A harquebus roared, and the ball whizzed past his cheek. Nevertheless, the young man was speedily outstripping his pursuers when a second patrol debouched down a side-alley into the street, and came forward, shouting and waving their pikes.

"Now I am undone," thought François, and stopped dead.

He glanced about him in that moment of desperation. The advancing party would cut off his flight toward the Hotel. There was a short alley on the left, but it ran down only to the swampy bank of the Seine. There was just the alternative—surrender, or fight and be cut to pieces.

François was almost beneath the grim old pile of masonry that was the Hotel d'Estaing. If he could cut his way through the newcomers, he could vanish in the maze of small courts and gardens at its base. With a reckless shout of "Ivry!" on his lips, which at once

betrayed him for one of Henri's Huguenot followers, he leaped forward, one against twelve.

But, before he could thrust himself upon the outstretched pike, there came a singular intervention.

With a roar like a wounded bull, a man detached himself from the shadows of the houses, and, yelling "Ivry!" too, raced at the oncoming troop. Behind him followed a second man, silent, but waving his sword as if he knew how to use it.

François stopped still again in amazement and horror. For he recognized that voice, if not the figures. The foremost of the two, now almost upon the pikemen, was Crillon, the most brave and reckless swordsman in the Huguenot army.

And the man behind him—now almost at his side—must be the one who held Crillon as his boon companion, his inseparable second—King Henri of Navarre himself!

WHAT prank or impatience had brought the two men into Paris in his own wake, François couldn't attempt to guess. And there wasn't time for guesswork. A swift glance behind showed him that the first patrol had still a little leeway to make up. With a shout of "Ivry!" upon his lips again, he flung himself at the troop in front, upon whose corselets the swords of Henri and Crillon were already hammering.

The pikes wavered and vanished. Before the charge of those two old swordsmen, the troop scattered. François saw Crillon sheer a mailed arm from its shoulder, saw Henri's sword clash through a hel-

met and dissolve a bobbing skull. His own point pierced a throat beneath a bushy beard and white, fear-harried face.

Then the three had won clear, and were standing breathless, while the remnants of the troop scurried away, leaving their pikes where they had fallen.

Suddenly the roar of the harquebuses rang out again, and a storm of balls hooted through the air. The troop behind had stopped to fire, regardless of the fact that some of the other patrol were in the roadway.

"Sire, I am François d'Alembert," pleaded the young man, trying to catch Henri by the arm.

"A million devils, shall we at those rascals again, Sire?" roared the enraged Crillon.

But by this time the combat had awakened the entire quarter. From all sides could be heard the shouts of more guards hurrying to the scene. The harbuebusiers behind were ramming down bullets and getting ready to apply wick-match-
es to priming-pans.

"Sire, France is at stake!" cried François to the King.

"*Ventre Saint Gris*, yes!" shouted Henri, ejaculating his favorite oath. "Discretion wins the day, Louis." He grabbed his companion by the shoulder and swung him about. And almost instantly the two were lost in the shadows cast by the great Hotel.

Left alone, François stood on no ceremony. He took to his heels and followed them, first along a narrow alley, then through a garden, then through the empty basement of an apparently deserted house. But there was no sign of Crillon or

the King. François found himself alone in what seemed a tiny quadrangle surrounded by stone walls, and the cries behind him indicated that his pursuers were on his trail.

A figure detached itself from the shadows. François made ready to thrust. What stayed his arm was the low, agitated woman's voice that came to his ears—for he could hardly distinguish the woman's dress.

"Quick, this way! Follow me!"

François almost lost her again, then saw that she was holding open a little postern in the wall. He leaped through in her wake, heard the roars behind him grow louder, but didn't stop to look. He sped on after the running woman, along a passage-way between two walls, then into a little doorway in what seemed to be the Hotel d'Estaing itself. In the complete darkness, the woman grasped him by the arm and hurried him along. She opened doors, and closed them behind her, but they two seemed to be alone in that part of the Hotel.

They were in a little room now, its four walls and the four-poster barely visible in the thread of moonlight that came through a slit. The woman turned toward François, and he knew that she was young and beautiful. He could feel the warm radiance of her.

Without a word, she glided toward him. François heard the soft rustle of falling garments. He saw the gleam of milk-white shoulders. He felt the pressure of soft lips on his. And, because life was sudden, swift, and apt to be extremely short, one didn't wait for reasons or explanations in the year 1592.



The girl swung viciously, and there was a dagger in her hand.

He grasped the girl in his arms, and felt her own tighten about his neck. He heard her quickened breathing, the soft whisper:

"Oh my King, you honor me too much!"

He thrust her away in horror, and at the same instant one hand, that had caressed his moustaches, seemed to discover that they were only an imitation of King Henri's. With a scream, the girl slapped the young man's face. And suddenly he recognized the dark beauty of Mademoiselle d'Estaing's maid.

"You are deceiving me! You are

tricking me! I'll have your life for this!"

It was easy now to understand why Henri had stolen into Paris too. Henri would risk his neck any day for a petticoat with a beautiful body inside it.

THE girl's arm swung viciously, and François guessed that there was a dagger in the hand that missed his chest. Girls had to carry daggers in those distracted days. But before he could grasp her arm—before she could swing again, there sounded a low burst of

vicious feminine laughter from where François imagined the door to be.

Another woman's form leaped past him, and in another moment there sounded a rough-and-tumble, the shrieks and hisses of women, the pummeling of fists, the rending of feminine garments, and a hollow, quivering slap that could only have been on resilient flesh.

François stood nonplussed, wondering what his next best move would be. The pummeling and the abuse went on and on. It was clearly a one-sided battle, and, dark though it was, François could distinguish, by the variations in the sound of the blows, just which particular part of the feminine anatomy was taking punishment.

François knew by experience the inadvisability of interfering in a feminine fracas; besides, he realized that he had almost committed *lèse-majesté* in approaching the latest young woman to have captured Henri's fickle fancy. His blood was still at fever-heat, for the girl had been adorable. But what worried François most was the realization that Henri must be somewhere in the purlieus of the Hotel, and in imminent danger—if he had not already been captured.

And, while he stood rooted there, though only for the fraction of a second, suddenly he heard a sound, a frightful sound that he knew well. It was the bull-roar of Crillon, echoing from vault to vault and room to room of the structure. It was the bellowing challenge with which Crillon started out to do battle.

Then Henri must be close at

hand, beset, perhaps, by the Duc de Mayenne's men, or those of General Grommeyer, the military Marshal of Paris.

His King was in danger. Like a shadow, François crept through the open doorway. Hardly had he passed when the two women began shrieking in fear, in response to Crillon's bull-throated challenge. One of them leaped for the door, passed out, and, turning, bolted it, shooting home a great iron tongue that burred along its socket.

She passed François, who was crouching against the wall, without seeing him, but not before a ray of moonlight, shining through a crevice, disclosed to him, as he had expected, the golden hair of *Mademoiselle d'Estaing*!

Crouching there, again and again François heard the roar of Crillon echo through the Hotel, the screams of frightened servants, and the clash of blades. Then François was on his feet, and running forward, trying to find the old warrior, whose triumphant shouts indicated that he was holding his own.

It seemed impossible to locate Crillon in that wilderness of empty corridors, which, in the few and infrequent rays of moonlight, seemed to stretch out to eternity.

And yet Henri must be fighting beside Crillon, silently, as was his wont.

François rushed along the corridor, in the direction from which the sounds seemed to be coming. Then he stopped again, for now they seemed to come from the opposite direction. Bewildered, he raged to and fro, until a gasping cry sounded almost beside him,

and he saw a narrow stairway that he had missed.

He darted down it, and came upon a landing-stage half-way. Crillon was standing there, mailed and sword in hand, facing a little crowd that clustered at the foot.

But Crillon was alone. At François's approach he half-turned for a moment.

"*Haron, mon roi!*" he shouted, and plunged downward.

The crowd beneath him broke and fled, leaving a litter of pikes upon the stairs, and three dead men. François stopped again.

"Fool! Fool!" cried a voice above him.

He looked back. The golden-haired Mademoiselle d'Estaing was standing at the top, calling and beckoning to him. As Crillon stood at the foot of the stairs, uttering his bull-call, François slowly re-ascended.

"My king!" he groaned.

Mademoiselle d'Estaing laid her hand upon his shoulder, and he saw the curve of her bust slide under her dress.

"He is safe. He has escaped—"

"My king, Henri, is safe?"

"You fool, why, I've locked him up for the night with a little wench who's just low enough to meet his tastes. He's safe enough. Come with me!"

IN THAT instant of relief at his king's safety, François failed to see the implication of Mademoiselle d'Estaing's words. But a moment later he understood what she meant.

In the darkness, she, too, had mistaken him for King Henri. She had beaten up the little, dark-

haired maid, because she herself had had an assignation with Henri, and was under the impression that the maid had stolen him away from her.

She had taken François for Henri, and now imagined that the King was safely locked in the maid's room.

Realizing that there was nothing he could do, until he had the opportunity of learning more, and guessing that Henri had somehow effected his escape, François yielded himself not unwillingly to Mademoiselle d'Estaing. She led him by the hand, through an open doorway, barely discernible in the darkness of the corridor, and into another room. A lock grated. Then they two stood facing each other.

It was a little lighter than it had been in the maid's room, but not much. It was light enough, however, for François to see the beautiful, shimmering golden hair, and the bodice, rent in the struggle with the maid, and revealing the thrilling outlines of two perfectly modeled breasts.

Then Mademoiselle's arms went around the young man's neck, and those same perfect breasts were strained against him.

"I'm in luck tonight after all," thought François. "Maybe this gift has come to me because I've got to die."

However, he didn't pause to analyze the gift. People had no time to stop and analyze those things. They just accepted them. And Mademoiselle d'Estaing was much more thrilling than the maid had been. She had a nobler way of making love . . . and the young man forgot himself completely. He

came back to his complete personality to find Mademoiselle still in his arms, and her lips softly brushing his cheek and moustaches.

"I love you," she said caressingly. "Now, who are you?"

"I—I am—I am named François d'Alembert," answered the young man.

"I knew you must be of the aristocracy, because you so much resemble the Huguenot King. Perhaps you are of his kin. I should not like this to have happened if you were just an ordinary man. I am very refined. Well, I had to get even with King Henri."

"How do you mean?" asked François.

"Why, even a king can't pretend to be in love with me, and then make use of me to make love to a wretched little maid."

FRANÇOIS thought that over.

"You mean that you've just been making use of me, in order to get back at King Henri?" he asked.

"That was my original intention. Even the King of Navarre can't treat me that way. But I've found out since that I am really in love with you, so everything is all right. Now what's worrying you?"

"I'm worried about the King and Crillon," said François.

"Bah, Crillon! That old soldier can take on all the guards in Paris and beat them. And as for the King, I've explained to you that he's locked up with that maid of mine. If I know Henri of Navarre, he won't be in any hurry to regain his freedom.

"Aren't you happy here with

me? Nobody will dare disturb us. Of course, I know you're one of the Huguenots, but I'll take good care of you.

"All you've got to do now is to stay here quietly, and I'll get you back through the lines, disguised as my maid, perhaps. Only you'll have to shave off those moustaches," she continued, fondling them with dainty fingers. "What a young man to be able to grow moustaches like that! Ah, I love you! Kiss me again—hard!"

Being young, François obeyed. And because Mademoiselle d'Estaing was also young, and charming, and ardent, he obeyed with a satisfaction that drove the thought of King Henri temporarily out of his mind, as well as the message that the King had entrusted to him. Mademoiselle had a way with her that some women know by instinct, and others can never learn as long as they live.

Blissful eternities ensued, and then Mademoiselle observed, with a sigh:

"I wish this stupid war was over. When it is over, how would you like a permanent appointment in my household?"

François forced himself to come back to reality. "I should love it," he answered. "But in the meanwhile I've got my work to do."

"Ah, yes. And what was this work that brought you into Paris?"

"Why, the King sent me on a mission to you."

"The devil he did! What was this mission? What do you mean?" demanded Mademoiselle.

"Why, he told me to tell you that he had decided to play the



"The King sent me on a mission to you," he said.

black, and not the red."

Mademoiselle was on her feet, snatching at her garments. François looked at her curving undulations with interest and a sense of triumph, but again he was beginning to be a little conscience-

stricken about Henri and Crillon.

"Why didn't you tell me, fool?" raved Mademoiselle.

"Why, you see—you see—" François stammered. He was afraid to tell her that Henri wasn't really locked up with the maid, and

that it had been he, not Henri. He cursed the day when he had tried to train his moustaches into the shape of his sovereign's.

BEFORE he could make confession, Mademoiselle d'Estaing was running out of the room. She didn't stop to lock the door on him. She seemed to have forgotten him. François sprang to his feet and followed her, adjusting his doublet, pulling his jerkin into place, and dragging his rapier into position. He didn't know what was going to happen, but he felt that he might need it.

As he ran, he heard Crillon's bull-voice roaring again somewhere in the Hotel. God, what a man! Crillon must have been fighting for hours, and he seemed to be on the prod the same as ever. But where was Henri?

"It's a mistake. You didn't lock—" François shouted, as he raced in pursuit of Mademoiselle along endless corridors.

She didn't seem to hear him. He had the greatest difficulty in keeping her in sight. But at last she was at the door of the maid's room, and François heard the tongue of the bolt shoot back.

Then he was in the room, and shaking Mademoiselle by the shoulder, as she beat with her fists at the cowering maid.

"The King! Where is he? How did he get away?" she screamed.

"He wasn't here. I was deceived by a traitor who pretended to be His Majesty."

François swung Mademoiselle around. "It was I whom you mistook for the King. It was my moustaches," he explained.

"*Ah mon Dieu, mon Dieu*, and I have notified the Committee of Sixteen that he was here!" wailed Mademoiselle. "And I betrayed my king for you, scum of the fish-halls!" She turned from the maid and slapped François violently across the face. "I hate you!" she cried. "Mon Dieu, where is the King? The archers of the guard should be here at any moment."

"So you betrayed him!" said François icily.

"*Mon Dieu*, I thought he had betrayed me—for that!" wept Mademoiselle.

Suddenly the bull-voice of Crillon broke upon their ears. Mademoiselle d'Estaing screamed, and then—Crillon appeared. Perhaps there was more moonlight now, but, anyway, he was visible, as he stood in the doorway.

He had on a helmet, a cuirass, and steel arm-pieces, and in his hand he held a sword. He stood there, waving his sword and leering like a terrible mask.

"*Eh bien*, Sire, I have killed the last of the patrol. Whom do we kill now?" he inquired of François. Then a terrific oath escaped him. "It is young d'Alembert! And it is for your sake I have been fighting half Paris these two hours past. Where is the King?"

The two men and Mademoiselle stared at one another, and nobody could answer the question. The maid, her hands across her bare breasts, came forward.

"It was all a mistake. He hasn't been here," she faltered.

"Name of the name of a pig, we've got to find him!" roared Crillon. "So you have been masquerading as my King?"

But there sounded the shouts of men somewhere in the darkness below. Mademoiselle d'Estaing cried:

"It is the Committee of Sixteen! They have come for the King! They will murder him! What shall we do?"

"Do? Why, we shall settle with the dogs as we settled with those others," laughed Crillon.

"No, listen! Listen quick, for I have a plan. This gentleman, Monsieur—Monsieur d'Alembert must pretend to be the King. You two must make some play of fighting, and then surrender. You, Monsieur Crillon, must make believe that Monsieur d'Alembert is the King. In that way, His Majesty, wherever he is, will have time to escape."

"Wherever he is. Aye, but where is he?" Crillon growled.

"I don't know."

"Henri is probably entangled at this moment with some petticoat. He thinks each one is different. He never can see that they are all the same. However—"

"You can make them believe that this gentleman is His Majesty. They will mistake him for the King on account of his moustaches, his beautiful moustaches. They would deceive anybody in the darkness. *Mon Dieu*, they deceived me!"

"Well, then—" said Crillon, hesitantly.

But the tumult below was increasing. Men were running along passages and hammering at doors, bellowing the King's name. There came a rush up a staircase. Out of the darkness a voice shouted:

"Henri of Navarre, and Monsieur de Crillon, wherever you are,

this is the time to surrender. Eh, Mademoiselle d'Estaing, you, too, for the Duc de Mayenne himself will not protect you, when you harbor traitors, renegades, and Huguenots. We know that Henri of Navarre is with you. Unless he and Monsieur de Crillon surrender, your Hotel will be blown to pieces, for we have posted artillery on every side."

"We fight you to the death!" roared Crillon.

THERE came a rush. The figures of men filled the passage. Crillon, forgetful of the arrangement he had made, sent his bull's voice echoing along the corridor again as he ran forward, swinging his sword. But his rush halted. For no man advanced to meet him. In the pale, errant moonlight, François, a foot behind him, saw that the passage was filled, not with swordsmen, but with harquebusiers, their weapons extended.

And to attack that serried line meant instant death. Even stout Crillon understood that, and stopped.

"You are no longer matching your trained sword against the guards, Monsieur de Crillon," said the voice. "Majesty of Navarre, surrender instantly, or we shall blow you and Crillon to hell."

François, remembering, shouted, "I surrender!"

Crillon's curses rang through the corridor, but Crillon seemed to remember, and made no further gesture of defiance.

But François, glancing over his shoulder, had noticed something that had made his blood run chill.

(Continued on page 122)

Diana Daw

DIANA, ESCAPING FROM GERMANY, IS CAPTURED BY A GROUP OF FORMER POLISH SOLDIERS, HIDING IN EASTERN POLAND.

By CLAYTON MAXWELL

UNABLE TO EXPLAIN HER PRESENCE IN POLAND, DIANA IS ROPED TO A TABLE BY HER POLISH CAPTORS. HOWEVER, SHE IS SAVED BY THE TIMELY ARRIVAL OF SOME SOVIET SOLDIERS.

WELL, WHAT HAVE WE HERE?

NOW WE'LL HAVE FUN!

FUN---YOU DOGS! SHE'S TOO GOOD FOR YOU. I'LL ATTEND TO HER MYSELF! UNTIE HER!

DIANA IS TAKEN TO AN INN WHERE THE RUSSIAN COMMANDER MAINTAINS HIS HEADQUARTERS

COME ON, SWEETHEART. YOU BETTER BE NICE TO ME OR I'LL TURN YOU OVER TO THE OGPU!

PLEASE---LEAVE ME ALONE!

I THOUGHT IN COMMUNISM WE SHARED THINGS EQUALLY. OUR OFFICERS GET ALL THE NICE THINGS. WHAT RIGHT HAS HE TO HER?

I'LL TIP OFF THE OGPU! HE'S CONSORTING WITH WHAT MAY BE A NAZI SPY!

YOU'RE UNDER ARREST, COLONEL SAMINOFF. CONSORTING WITH A NAZI--WHO MAY BE A SPY!

SAMINOFF AND DIANA ARE TRIED TO-
GETHER.

AND IT IS THE SENTENCE OF THIS COURT
THAT YOU BOTH BE SENT TO A CONCENTRATION
CAMP IN SIBERIA!



DIANA AND SAMINOFF ARE TAKEN TO THE
SIBERIAN CONCENTRATION CAMP -



HOWEVER, THEY ARE OBSERVED BY A GROUP
OF ROUGHLY-DRESSED MEN, HIDING IN
THE HILLS

THERE ARE TWO MORE
POOR DEVILS BEING MARCHED
TO PRISON. SHALL WE RESCUE
THEM, MEN?

YES!



YES!

LET 'EM HAVE
IT, MEN!



DIANA!



TED! EVERYTHING HAS COME BACK TO
ME. I REMEMBER -- I'M DIANA DAW!

DIANA--
DIANA!!



WHAT FURTHER ADVENTURES
BEFALL DIANA AND TED? SEE THE AUG.
ISSUE OF SPICY ADVENTURE STORIES.

CREATED

Vult jumped backward. His
Y-gun spat blue gas!



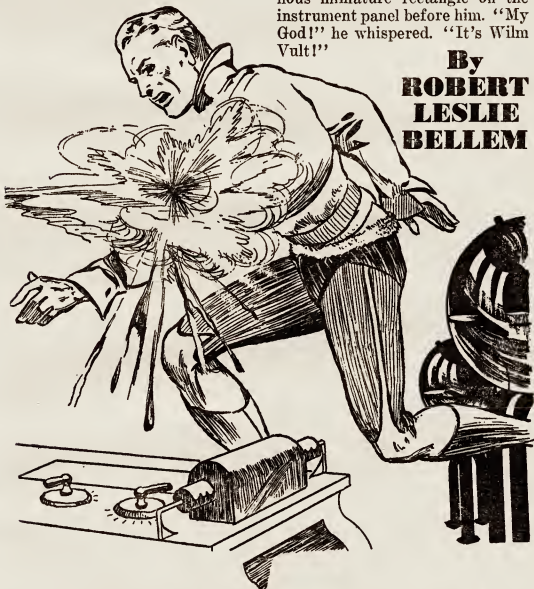
HIE THEM

IT WAS like seeing a dead man's face, hearing the voice of a corpse. Jon Ad was so startled he lost control of his Vult antigrav car; almost sent the sleek little speedstreamer spinning to

swift destruction on the glittering chromium spires of City Three, far below his aerial traffic lane.

Eyes widened, he stared unbelievably at the stereo visaplate of his telerad set, which made a luminous miniature rectangle on the instrument panel before him. "My God!" he whispered. "It's Wilm Vult!"

By
ROBERT
LESLIE
BELLEM



In the twenty-first century, no one believed in black magic. Yet Wilm Vult had separated Jon Ad from his anti-self—a being of evil. And had done the same to the girl Jon loved!

No doubt about it, the photo-vised face smiling three-dimensionally at Jon Ad from the tiny frame was that of his science mentor of undergraduate days. There could be no mistaking Vult's shaggy and leonine head, the bearded and intelligent features. Nor could anyone have counterfeited the rumbling voice which emanated from the telespeaker: "Hello, Jon Ad. Turn on your transmitter so I can see and hear you."

But the thing was fantastically impossible, for Vilm Vult had been dead a good four years.

Bewildered, Jon Ad made no move to flip the switch. How, he asked himself, could a dead man speak to him? There were no such things as ghosts in the pure science-life of the year 2140 A.D. That sort of superstition had died out almost two centuries ago, back in the nineteen hundreds. Moreover, how could a ghost make use of an instrument so wholly material as a man's private telerad?

Nothing could be less supernatural than a telerad hookup. Every citizen possessed one, operating on his individual wavelength. Radio channels had long ago been split into vernier graduations, thousands of them crowded into each frequency formerly allotted to a single broadcasting unit. A wavelength was assigned to you, much the same as a telephone number in the old days; you had one receiver-transmitter in your home, another in your antigrav car. To contact anybody in the nation you looked him up in the teledirectory, twirled your autodial. When he switched in to answer you, a visual conversation ensued; you saw and

spoke to each other as if in the same room, though perhaps three thousand miles intervened.

But at least the party at the other end of the connection had to be alive; not four years dead, as Wilm Vult was!

Vult's pleasant bellow sounded again in the telespeaker: "Are you there, Jon Ad? Switch in, man. It's important."

Then Jon Ad saw that his antigrav car was spinning dizzily earthward; he grabbed the controls in time to avoid smashing into a passenger speedstreamer in the lower lane. His machine responded instantly; flashed upward to the proper level, regained even keel. This immediate maneuverability was a tribute to the genius of Wilm Vult, who had discovered and perfected the antigrav principle—only to lose all profit from the invention by gambling away his holdings on the stock market.

The loss had caused Vult's suicide. Yet here was his voice saying: "I'm not dead, old chap. Please switch in."

JON AD pressed the cut-on button. "Is this some joke?"

"Ah. Now I can see you, hear you. That's better, Jon. Listen. For the time, I don't want the world to know I'm still alive. I'll explain my reasons later. Right now I want you in my laboratory—which nobody else knows about." He gave its location.

Jon Ad broke in. "Does Helm know about—about—?"

"About my not being dead? Yes. She's here with me now. A pleasant reunion, too; you should have seen her when she learned her

shaggy old father was still living! By the way, she tells me she's engaged to you, Jon."

Jon Ad nodded into the visascope. "We're to be married next week, sir. Our brokerage employers are giving us a month for the honeymoon. Put Heln on the screen, won't you? I'd like to say good morning."

A flicker of craftiness seemed to slither across Vult's pale blue eyes, then vanished. "She's—er, busy right now. But you'll see her when you get here. Oh, yes, you'll certainly see her."

In the older man's tone, Jon Ad detected an undercurrent of something he didn't like. A vague sixth sense made him suddenly uneasy. "I'll be right there, sir," he said. He broke the telerad connection, fed full power to his antigrav's silent mechanism.

Twenty minutes later he came to earth in a clearing bordered by a thick grove of oaks on the western shore of Michlake; pelted toward a square structure fashioned of solaroid pliobrick set deep within the woods and hidden by leafy foliage from overhead aerial traffic lanes. As he ran, a door opened before him and Wilma Vult stepped forth, huge, muscular, grinning in his beard. There was a Y-ray gun in Vult's hairy right fist. He aimed it at Jon Ad.

"Got you, sucker!" he announced.

Jon Ad drew up short. "What's the idea, sir?"

"You'll find out. Meantime, don't make any silly moves. You probably know what the Y-ray does to a man. It disintegrates his insides without spoiling his outer

appearance. That way, the mourners can remark what a lovely corpse he makes in his coffin. You wouldn't want any mourners saying that about you, would you?"

Jon Ad felt a kind of panic. "Where's Heln?" he burst out.

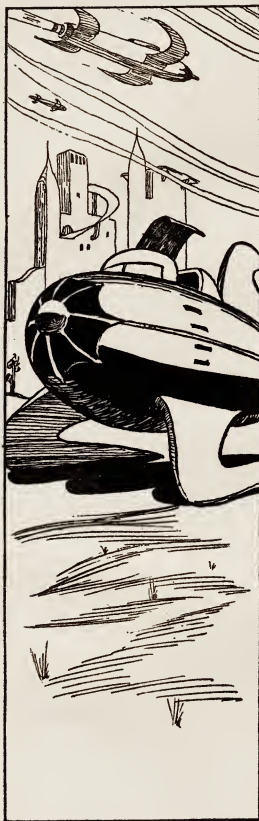
"Safe and sound. Come along; I'll show her to you."

"Show her to me?" Jon Ad felt the short hairs rising at the nape of his neck. Vult's words had an ominous ring; seemed to indicate that Heln was being held in restraint—or worse. And there was a maniacal expression slithering into the older man's eyes, now; the same expression Jon Ad had noticed on the scientist's bearded face a while ago, in the telerad's visaplate.

Vult chortled, deep in his thick throat. "Come along, my would-be son-in-law." He prodded Jon Ad into the laboratory. It was a square room lined with strange electrical apparatus such as the world had never before known. There were giant condensers, humming generators of curious design, switches and control panels whose purpose Jon Ad couldn't guess. Nor was he interested, for suddenly he saw his beloved Heln.

"Great God!" he rasped, and tried to leap toward her.

SHE lay strapped to a tilted metal table, her enticing young body slanting head-downward at an angle of twenty degrees—and she was stripped almost naked. Leather thongs crossed her slim ankles and flattened her shapely legs to the table's smooth surface; another strap cut cruelly into the creamy whiteness of her thighs.



An odd network of finely-woven wire mesh lay like an apron upon her slender waist and lyric hips; a similar metallic concealment squeezed the alluring mounds of her breasts, like a tight brassiere of torture. Her wrists were bound together under the table, her hair streamed to the floor in a golden waterfall, and abysmal fear lay in her azure eyes.

"Jon! Jon Ad!" she whimpered through tremulous red lips.

He hurled himself at her; then stiffened into immobility as he felt Wilm Vult's Y-gun jamming into his spine. "Hold it, hero!" the bearded scientist snarled. "Don't make me kill you. I have use for you—alive!"

Jon Ad whirled. "What's the meaning of all this?"

"You'll learn. Be patient."

"Patient? With Heln strapped to that table for God knows what reason? My God, man, she's your own daughter! What are you going to do to her?"

"Divide her antithetically," Vult said. "Remember how I perfected the antigrav car? I worked on the theory that all matter is energy, and all energy has its embodied antithesis—its direct opposite. When I found the way to separate gravity into its two parts, I utilized the negative half to energize my antigrav cars. They fly without falling because they operate on an anti-gravity principle; yet gravity itself is not disturbed in any way."

"I know all that. Come to the point!"

"The Walstreet thieves stole my fortune, ruined me. I wanted revenge. I pretended to kill myself,

but the corpse found by the police was merely the body of a man I murdered for the purpose; while I, meanwhile, came here and set up a secret laboratory."

"Well?"

"This morning, after four years of experimenting, I achieved the ultimate success in my researches. I summoned my daughter here to demonstrate, with her living body, the fact that I can divide her into duplicate twins. One twin will be Heln; the other will be anti-Heln. She—"

SHOCKED horror came into Jon Ad's throat. He balled his fists; smashed himself at the heavier man. Vult jumped backward, and his Y-ray gun spat blue gas. Jon Ad felt a stinging sensation needling his left forearm; froze when he saw the sleeve of his coat disintegrating, sluffing off. He drew a strangled breath.

"Don't worry," the scientist chuckled. "I deliberately missed you that time. But let it be a warning. Now don't make another move or it'll be your guts that disintegrate!" He grinned paternally. "I know you're worried for Heln's safety; but I assure you she will be unharmed by my demonstration."

"Unharmed. . . ?"

"Of course," Vult said. "Is there any change in the force of gravity, merely because I divide the anti-gravity from it? Certainly not! It will be the same with Heln. Divided and twinned, her duplicate counterpart will be an anti-Heln; will be a creature of evil, just as Heln is all that's good and sweet and wholesome."

From the table, Heln herself



Together they raced toward the antigrav speedstreamer.

whimpered: "Jon . . . no! Don't let him do it! He's insane—and I'm afraid!"

Jon Ad heard, and his reflexes answered for him. Unmindful of the death that could issue from the Y-ray gun, he again lunged at the bearded scientist. His fist arced upward; bashed home to a hirsute chin.

Vult righted himself; spat a bloody oath. "You swine!" he roared. He raised the Y-ray weapon. But instead of triggering it, he maced its muzzle across Jon Ad's skull with sickening force. The impact was brutal, savage, final. Jon Ad fell forward like a hewn oak; measured his length on the laboratory floor. Black oblivion closed in on him.

MOONLIGHT was flowing eerily through the building's translucent pliobrick walls when he awakened. He was in a tiny prison cubicle, trussed hand and foot to an iron cot. And someone was leaning over him, touching him.

"Heln!" he whispered, sensing the fragrance of her golden hair and the warmth of her well-remembered hands. "Heln—what are you doing here?"

She put her ripe lips close to his ear; her swelling breasts brushed his shoulder, yieldingly. "Be quiet, Jon. We're going to escape while my father is asleep." Her fingers worried at his fetters; loosened them.

"But—but what happened? The experiment—" he gasped as the last knot came undone. He sat up.

She panted: "His apparatus went wrong at the last moment. He couldn't complete the test on me.

So he freed me and set to work making repairs. A while ago he fell into an exhausted slumber. It was my chance! Now we'll get away. Come!"

Together they sped into the open, with Heln in the lead. Her toga-like robe of nylasilk flowed about her lithe curves, limning them in the moonlight as she raced toward Jon Ad's speedstreamer. They gained the antigrav car; he helped her in, took his place at the controls. Like a swift rocket the car went swishing upward. Jon Ad slipped an arm about his fiancée's lissome waist; his palm encountered yielding sweetness through her single gossamer garment. . . .

She made no move to draw away, although never before had she permitted such an intimate caress. Instead, she nestled closer to him; put her own hand on his and pressed his fingers against her body. "Jon," she whispered.

"Yes, Heln?"

"Wh-what are we to do about my father? Obviously he's deranged. But when I think of reporting him, having him sent to some institution, I—I can't stand it!"

"But it's got to be done, my sweet. He's dangerous."

She drew a quivering breath. "I g-guess you're right. We'd better go to the authorities at once." Then, abruptly, she added: "Can we stop at the brokerage office first? I left something in my desk. . . ."

"Of course," he said. He changed the direction of his antigrav car; moments later he landed it on the flat roof of the building where he and Heln worked. He

used his key to open the suite. They entered.

In the dim glow of a night-light, she drew something from her desk drawer; thrust it into the loose bodice of her toga. "Know what it is?" she smiled softly, almost coquettishly.

He shook his head. "What?"

"Our wedding wristlets. I bought them yesterday to surprise you."

His pulse leaped. "Let me see them. Please." Always his blood raced faster when he thought of their approaching nuptials. It thrilled him to know that soon Heln would belong to him, irrevocably and forever, body and soul and mind. In anticipation he could savor the moist succulence of her lips, the sweet surrender of her lithe form. . . .

She was smiling at him again; it was almost a wanton smile, challenging, inviting. "If you really want to see the wristlets, Jon . . . then get them for yourself." She moved toward him; her toga gaped open at the throat.

The bold bid startled him; this was a new Heln, a Heln of sinuous allurements and azure-eyed temptation. He could see the mounded contours of her breasts under the thin white nylasilk that draped them; her lyric hips swayed in languorous rhythm as his fingers reached forth to touch her.

Within his veins, a dam seemed to burst; desire flooded him like a scalding tide. He grabbed her and plunged his fingers under her garment, seeking the wedding wristlets; then he forgot the baubles as his hand touched more enticing treasures. His arm encircled her;

he bent her far backward as he stormed passionate kisses on her parted lips, her closed eyes, her throbbing white throat. "Heln . . . my dearest dear. . . !" he whispered.

Her moan of response inflamed him. "Jon . . . I love you. . . ."

THE toga had fallen away from her snowy shoulders, now; he could see the upper swells of her breasts, like great creamy pearls, taut and out-thrust with her swift breathing. His mouth traversed the velvety skin of her throat, drawing gasps of fervent response from her ripe lips with each ecstatic exhalation. He lifted her to the top of the glassodesk behind her. . . .

What was that?

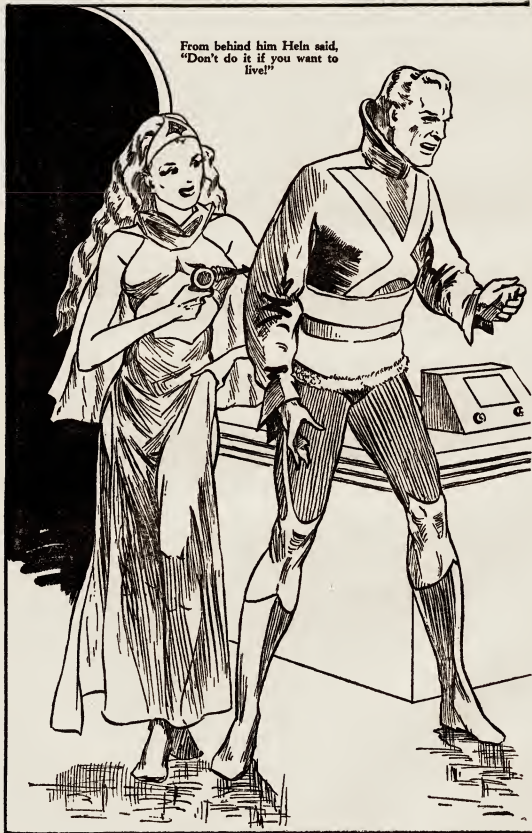
He heard the sound, and he recognized it. Someone was operating the vault-safe's mechanilock in the next room of the brokerage suite; the electrical click of tumblers echoed across the stillness like the tinkling of steel bells. Then came a whispering creak; that would be the vault door swinging open—

"Burglars!" Jon Ad gasped. He leaped away from Heln; pivoted. Then, just as he was about to catapult toward the adjoining office, a stupefied bewilderment froze him in his tracks.

Jon Ad was coming out of that next room.

But how could it be John Ad, he asked himself, when he—the *real* Jon Ad—stood here in the outer office? He was not twins; he couldn't be in two places at once. Yet that other man was his exact counterpart—like a mirrored reflection of himself. And the dupli-

From behind him Hela said,
"Don't do it if you want to
live!"





cate Jon Ad had a thick sheaf of currency in his hand; had just robbed the brokerage safe!

Then the truth dawned on him. "Wilm Vult's work!" he raged. He tensed his muscles to spring.

From behind him, Heln said: "Don't do it. Unless you want to die."

He wheeled around; faced her. She had whipped up the lower hem of her toga, baring her dainty legs well above the knees. Around the columnar purity of her right thigh, a holster was strapped; she drew a small Y-ray gun from the holster, aimed it at Jon Ad. "You fool!" she smiled, and the smile was like an evil sneer.

He realized, abruptly, to what foul extent he had been duped. "You—you're not Heln!" he whispered dully. "You're her molecular twin! You're . . . anti-Heln!"

"Right," she said carelessly. "It took you quite a while to dope it out, didn't it?"

THEN he knew, bitterly, that Wilm Vult's experiment had been carried to successful fruition. By some weird electronic division, Vult had multiplied his daughter's atomic structure; had created a duplicate of her—but a duplicate bereft of all the genuine Heln's sweet wholesomeness. This foul twin was a creature without soul, without morals, without a will of her own; she was Wilm Vult's creature, obeying only his commands. It explained why she had been so passionately willing to allow Jon Ad to caress her, make love to her. . . .

"It was a trick to make me open the front door of the brokerage

suite!" he said unsteadily. "So that my own anti-self could come in and rob the safe!"

The anti-Heln nodded. "Correct, sucker. While I held your attention, your atomic twinself was making hay." She beckoned to Jon Ad's grinning counterpart. "Give me the money. I'll take it to the Master; it will repay him in part for the fortune Walstreet stole from him."

"That's a lie! Walstreet never stole anything from Wilm Vult!" Jon Ad rasped. "He gambled his money away; lost it through his own folly! This is thievery!"

The anti-Heln shrugged. "We wouldn't know about that. We merely obey the Master's commands. He separated me from his daughter; gave me existence. He did the same with your molecular-twin over there. Now we show our gratitude by doing what we're told to do." She darted a glance at the anti-Jon Ad. "Give me the money and be on your way. You have killing to do: the four men who robbed our Master. The financier named Morg is the first on your list. Go."

Jon Ad's twin nodded, tossed the packet of currency across the room, stalked out. The real Jon Ad felt his mouth going dry. "So it's to be murder as well as burglary! Murder—because a madman thinks he's entitled to revenge! I can't let it happen!" And he launched himself at the girl who was not Heln.

Her Y-ray gun spat blue gas, But even as she triggered, Jon Ad stumbled and fell. He landed behind a glassdesk; felt it quiver and jar as the Y-ray struck it. But

he was unharmed by the blast; lead was the one element impervious to Y-rays, and the desk's solid glass structure obviously contained lead. Therefore he was shielded, protected. His only hurt was a bruised forehead, where he had struck his temple in falling.

The anti-Heln apparently thought she had slain him, for she bared her alluringly nude right thigh, holstered her gun. "I must go to the laboratory," she said aloud. "The Master might want me to attend my molecule-twin in her drugged sleep." She glided out of the suite.

JON AD swayed dizzily upright; staggered after her. But when he reached the landing-roof of the building, she was gone; she had taken his antigrav car and vanished.

He remembered the words she had spoken to herself; words that assured him the real Heln was alive—in dope-induced slumber. "Thank God for that much!" he whispered. Then he raced to a light-switch on a shielded control panel; blinked a speedstreamer-taxi signal.

A cruising Silver antigrav swooped from an aerial lane; dropped to a smooth landing. The hackman said: "Yes, sir?"

"To the residence of Peer Morg, the banker!" Jon Ad panted. "And hurry!"

Haste was in his veins, hammering at his heart. He must reach Peer Morg before that murder-creature, the false Jon Ad, had a chance to kill. And the hackman seemed to sense this urgency; he fed full power into his antigrav

mechanism, and the silvery speedstreamer rocketed upward.

The moondrenched miles wailed past Jon Ad's ears; he crouched forward, peering with narrowed eyes. The Morg mansion loomed dead ahead. A dark antigrav coupe was just settling to the landing-roof. Jon Ad shouted: "Faster—faster! Before that man can get into Morg's house to murder him!"

The silver taxicar glided in; stopped. Jon Ad leaped to the roof; his twinself turned, saw him, snarled. Jon Ad said: "Now, damn you—!" and flung himself into combat.

Man and anti-man came to grips like infuriated lions. The hackman, watching, suddenly saw the faces of both combatants—and realized that they were identical. "Gawd!" he gasped. "I'm seein' double! I gotta get outa here!" He lifted his speedstreamer, sent it screaming toward the nearest whiskeybar. From that night onward, his dreams would be unpleasantly troubled. . .

But Jon Ad had no thoughts for the hackman. He was battling a creature who matched him ounce for ounce, power for power; a creature of evil, wrought from Jon Ad's own anti-molecules. This snarling *thing*-man was his own counterpart, his atomic twin—separated from him by a madman's electronic wizardry. How could such a fantastic battle end? How could either self triumph over the other?

Yet Jon Ad knew he must win, lest multiple murder be done tonight. He bashed a sledgehammer blow home to the snarling mouth

of his anti-self; followed with another. He felt pain blazing through his head as knuckles collided above his ear; his dazed brain faltered for an instant, and he fell into another vicious blow. It jarred him to his heels. He tottered; and in sheer desperation he lunged forward like a Mars-rocket. His skull impacted sickeningly against his twin-self's face, smashing it. The creature shot backward like a projectile, struck the parapet around the roof's edge and fell over. A scream of hellish intensity came from below; then a dull, squishy thud. After that, silence settled.

Jon Ad peered over the parapet; smiled bloodily. His atomic twin was dead—and there could never be another. No more anti-molecules existed in Jon Ad's structure. Nor would that pulped corpse ever be identified; after a fall of forty floors, nothing remained but a shapeless blob. . .

The dead creature's antigrav car was on the roof, where he had left it. Jon Ad leaped into its compartment, manipulated the ray-controls. He headed toward Michlake—and a final showdown.

DAWN was streaking the east when Jon Ad landed in the woodland clearing. Until that moment, he'd had no idea of the passage of time; the night's events had been too swift, too bewildering. Now, in the grey light, he raced toward the pliobrick laboratory building.

Its front door was open; Heln stood there waiting for him, her blue eyes worried, her arms outstretched. His heart gave a great

(Continued on page 118)

BURNED BRIDGES

IN THE still tropic night the sea stirred in phosphorescent ripples as its calm surface was broken by the dropping of the anchor. John Boone took a deep breath of anticipation, gazing over the rail at the Java shore-line only a couple of hundred feet away. The goal that had brought him all the way from New York was within striking distance, somewhere in that inky jungle growth that started almost at the shore line and extended back nobody knew how far.

The Southern Cross seemed only a little less brilliant than the moon over the slumbering, towering volcano in the distance. Boone stretched and flexed his muscles. Nothing could be done before daylight, but in the morning —

A shuffling footfall behind him brought him suddenly alert. It was Francia, the Portuguese owner-captain of the schooner he had chartered at Singapore. "You promised, Mr. Boone, to tell me why we came here, once we had anchored."

Boone nodded slowly. "Yes. Come with me to my cabin."

From an inner pocket in his trunk Boone brought out a yel-

lowed chart. He spread it on a table. Before them was a map of the Indian Ocean. Boone put his pencil point on the coast-line. "We are approximately here. Back there in the jungle"—he gestured almost directly inland—"there are half a million dollars' worth of pearls."

The Portuguese stared at him as if he were mad. "Pearls, mister? Pearls in the jungle?"

Boone grinned. "It's a long story, and I'll try to keep it short. My father was a pearl trader. A partner of his named Swithin ran off with all the pearls owned by the partnership, and disappeared completely. He and his young daughter were traced to this point on the coast. They were never known to have come out of the jungle again. My father always suspected that Swithin was killed by natives. But father was sure he would have had the good sense to have hidden the pearls first."

Boone refolded the chart and returned it to its hiding-place. He did not see the thoughtful, crafty look that flickered momentarily in the captain's eyes. "That's what you and I are here for," he said lightly. "If we never find the

By HARLEY L. COURT

*Nobody but that amazing girl knew the secret of the Vale of
Poison, and by her knowledge she was able to control the
barbaric natives*



"I hate you!" she cried, but he didn't believe her.

pearls, you have nothing to lose. I'm paying you for your time." Together they went back on deck.

TO BOONE'S eyes the jungle was an enticing, beckoning mystery. All that was ominous, foreboding about its tangled shoreline represented a challenge, a sporting gamble. He caught Francia's forearm in tense fingers. "Look!"

The full moon lighted the narrow beach so that it was almost as bright as day. With a snapping of bamboo the inky jungle had opened at one point to let a human figure onto the glistening sand. It was a woman, and she was white! Except for a sarong she was elementally naked. And on a leash, tugging at her wrist, was a seven foot leopard!

The beast sniffed, pointed at the schooner, and snarled venomously. But the girl, in her passage to the water's edge, acted as if she were unaware that human eyes stared at her.

She was like a goddess, infinitely graceful in motion, inexpressibly proud of carriage. Her bare shoulders gleamed with the sheen of polished ivory where they curved into her beautifully rounded arms. Her glorious breasts moved with a little lilt with her stride. Her legs were long and symmetrical and they tapered delicately into slender ankles and sandaled feet.

Boone held his breath. The whole scene was incredible. He turned his attention again to the leopard. Even at that distance he could see the savage glow in the animal's eyes. He was straining at his leash; but the girl held him easily.

Suddenly, still with no sign that

she had seen the schooner, the girl turned on her heel, and the jungle swallowed her and her pet as completely as if they had never existed. Boone rubbed his eyes.

Then he was conscious of a Malay deckhand addressing the captain in awed tones. "That girl—she is the White Princess of *Guwa Upas*! Not many men have seen her and lived!"

"She's lovely!" Boone said, hardly aware that he'd spoken. "Who is she? What's she doing in the jungle?"

The native deckhand shook his head. "I can't tell you, *tuan*. All I know is that it is death to venture into the *Guwa Upas*, the Vale of Poison. Only the White Princess can go there with her people and return unharmed. Without her presence no man can breathe in that place." The Malay clutched his throat and made strangling sounds.

A little later he strolled aft and the Portuguese captain followed him. Boone could hear them talking in low tones. But all his interest was on that shoreline where the girl had disappeared. Perhaps he would see her again when he went into the interior—

There was a deep rumble from the bowels of Mt. Solak, far off over the tree-tops. And at the same time a sudden wind sprang up and sang eerily through the ship's rigging. It was like a warning that died into silence as quickly as it had been spoken.

BY DAY the sun turned the jungle into a steaming cauldron. With the Malay deckhand and a Javanese sailor, all three armed

with short knives, Boone had penetrated three miles into the dank morass. Now he stopped to rest in a mangrove clearing.

It had been hard work, getting even this far. It was almost like ripping through a woven fabric as they had hacked their way through giant orchids, weird pitcher plants, vari-colored and unnamed tropic shrubs. Wild hogs had fled their coming. There had been Kidang deer, jabbering monkeys, and unbelievably large jungle rats.

Boone mopped his dripping face. Only his sixth sense made him hear the sound behind him. He whirled, his hand plunging for the revolver slung at his hip. Even then he was too late to dodge entirely the heavy blow aimed at his head. The club grazed his skull and crashed painfully down on his shoulder, and Boone looked into the hate-contorted face of the Malay deckhand.

Rage danced in Boone's eyes. He brought up his .45. But before he could fire, the Javanese sailor had launched himself on Boone's shoulders.

For a moment it was touch-and-go. All three rolled on the earth. Boone's hand that held the gun was plunged into a seething mud-hole. He got his fingers on the sailor's neck when the Malay's knee shot into his stomach. On top of that, a stone — Boone couldn't see whose hand held it — raked his cheek, plowing a bloody furrow.

Then Boone's fist caught the Javanese full in the mouth, knocking out teeth, and dropping the man face down in the mire. Boone wheeled just in time to duck an-

other swing from the Malay's club. He dived for his gun that he had dropped, and leveled it before the man had regained his balance.

Fear sprang up in the man's face. "Don't shoot, *tuan!*" he begged, suddenly abject.

"Why not?" Boone snapped. "You tried to kill me!"

"But it wasn't of my doing. It was under orders from Captain Francia. He wants the treasure of pearls for himself!"

Fury boiled in John Boone's veins. "I might have guessed it," he muttered. "The pearls are mine. And you, and that ratty little side-kick of yours, are going on with me! If either of you makes the slightest funny move from now on, I'm not going to stop to argue the matter!" He turned to the prone sailor and kicked him in the ribs. "Get on your feet!"

The groaning Javanese staggered upright, and stood swaying. And then hell broke loose!

FROM all sides there burst upon them a yelling pack of mahogany-skinned natives. Bamboo javelins whistled over their heads. The Javanese sailor cried out horribly as one of the spears, tipped with lava ground to a fine point, entered his chest and protruded a foot through his back.

John Boone brought up his mud-caked revolver and triggered it again and again. Its clogged mechanism refused to function. He clubbed it in his fist and smashed it down on the skull of his nearest attacker. The man went down.

But there were too many of them. Though they fought like madmen, the American and the

Malay deckhand were soon overpowered by sheer weight of numbers. A few minutes later, bound hand and foot, they were being borne away over the crude suggestion of a trail. Boone's whole body was an aching mass of agony. For hours they progressed in that fashion.

And then before them a cleared plateau opened up. Bamboo huts were scattered thickly about. On each side of their march naked native women lined the way. The procession came to a halt before a larger, more pretentious structure.

Boone's pulses leaped as he first cast his eyes on the rough veranda before the building. Standing before the entrance door was the white girl, the White Princess of *Guwa Upas*, the girl he had seen on the beach with her pet leopard!

In the bright sunlight her hair gleamed like spun gold. A lei of blood-red hibiscus blossoms failed to conceal the splendid hemispheres of her firm, maidenly breasts. From head to foot, every sweet curve of her entrancing figure was lovely enough to drive a man mad. Her unwavering, deep purple eyes studied the American.

There was a short colloquy between the girl and the leader of the prisoners' guards, but it was in a dialect foreign to Boone. In answer two of the natives led the Malay deckhand away while the others guided Boone onto the veranda.

The White Princess looked thoughtfully at Boone's blood-smeared face and muddy clothing. She spoke again to the leader of the guards. The man bowed low

and led Boone around the side of a building to a room with barred windows. A bolt shot home behind him.

THE room was scrupulously clean. On the floor was a mat of woven grass. At one side a bamboo bed was covered with soft animal skins. The American was still examining his prison when the door opened. A native girl carrying a gourd of water and a towel came in. She put down her burdens, smiled, untied his bonds, and left. But Boone realized that he was not yet in a position to attempt to escape. Undoubtedly there were guards outside attending to that.

The cool, fresh water was like balm to Boone's aches and bruises. He had finished washing up when his guard reappeared. Without a word the man grasped Boone's arm and led him outside. He indicated a hand-hewn chair on the veranda and Boone sat down wearily.

Before him was a deep declivity and, on the far side of the valley, he could see the volcano rising almost perpendicularly to its crater. He was conscious all the time of his guard, standing immobile beside him, naked *kris* in hand.

Despite the fact that he was a prisoner, it was hard for Boone to feel worried. Rather his chief emotion beyond his tiredness was one of excitement. Near him was the strange girl who had affected him so strongly on first sight. He was sure he would see her again soon, and his pulse was rapid in expectation.

As if in answer to his thought,

she appeared suddenly before him. Clad still in nothing but the flowered sarong, she dropped into the chair at his right.

To his amazement she addressed him in English, extending to him at the same time a pair of tarnished, old field-glasses.

"Look into the valley there," she said, "and tell me what you see."

The American attempted to conceal his start of surprise. He raised the glasses and scanned the panorama before him. At the base of the volcano was a broad valley half-observed by shimmering, dancing, refracted heat-waves. And then Boone shuddered at what he saw. The whole floor of the valley was like an open burial-ground. It was strewn with bleached bones, the skeletons of animals and birds, the skeletons of what must have once been human beings! In the sparse vegetation the bones were a ghastly, deadly white, scattered helter-skelter, as if each lay where its owner had died.

Boone put down the glasses and lifted his eyes to the girl. "You were looking at the *Guwa Upas*, the Vale of Poison," she stated in matter-of-fact tones. "One breath of its air and all living things die. Strangers who visit my country from the outside world journey there. It is the law. And it is their last resting place."

She finished and a hullabaloo of gongs and tom-toms arose from the terrace immediately in front of the veranda. Native voices rang out in what was probably meant for song. Boone leaned forward and looked more intently. Four na-

tives, armed with short spears, were prodding the Malay deck-hand from the schooner Boone had chartered down the narrow path toward the valley. Again and again he stumbled, but his tormentors urged him on viciously.

When his form became dim in the distance, Boone lifted the glasses again. He saw the whole ghastly tragedy. The Malay was alone now and terror showed on his dark face as he looked back at his four guards. Their arms, upraised with spears poised, told him there was no hope that way. He staggered on.

He came to a pass into the bottom of the valley so narrow that two men could not have walked through abreast. Again he paused. A rock was over his head, balanced so delicately that a light shove could have dropped it and closed the pass. The spears behind him gestured menacingly.

Weak-kneed, he entered.

Fascinated, Boone watched his progress. He strode forward three or four steps, then staggered. His hands clawed frantically at his throat. He went to his knees and turned, trying to crawl back to the valley's entrance. Before he had moved two yards, he shuddered convulsively and dropped. He lay there without moving.

SHAKEN with horror, Boone turned to the girl. "Why did you do that to that man?"

Her reply was unbelievably bitter. "Because I hate all men from the outer world. Men from outside killed my father, and I have sworn vengeance on all who come within my power!"

"Your father? Who was he?"

Her voice became softer. "My father was gentle, good and kind. He brought me here as a little girl, and he taught me as part of my education to hate and fear all men from outside—men such as yourself.

"My father had been driven into the jungle by men who wanted to kill him. All his life he had had to hide. But he told me what sort of men his enemies were. At last the jungle got him. Fever." Her eyes grew stormy. "Except for men like you my father need never have left civilization. You killed him! I hate you, and the 'civilization' you represent!"

Throughout her speech Boone had felt more and more strongly the magic of her presence. A strange tingling raced through his veins. But first he must know what he had begun to suspect—

"What was your father's name?"

"Swithin. Gordon Swithin. I'm Susan."

John Boone gave no sign of the conflicting emotions that churned in his breast. It was as he had guessed. The girl was the daughter of his father's swindling partner! And that meant that the pearls were probably not far away.

He studied her face, wondering if he should tell her. But staring at her, he felt all thought of the pearls slide meaninglessly from his mind. She was so sweet, so glamorous, so utterly alluring. He smiled into her violet eyes.

She flushed slightly, but not with displeasure. It was more as if she could read what was in his heart. A mist came into her gaze. Impul-

sively she spoke to the native guard by the American's chair, dismissing him.

She leaned toward Boone. Her red lips were slightly parted. He stretched out an arm that crept around her shoulders. At the same time he slid his chair nearer to hers. She sighed. Her skin was like cool satin to his feverish touch.

His head lowered to hers and her bare arms reached toward him in response. Her hair was soft on his cheek and her lips were soft and moist and intoxicating. He drew her to him and thrilled to the pressure of her resilient breasts against his chest. The fluttering of her heart communicated itself to him. Her breath was quick and gusty.

Such ecstasy as this he had never known. She was limp and pliant, every subtle curve of her figure molded to his. She moaned softly. . . .

AND then unexpectedly her body became rigid. Fire darted from her eyes. She drew away stiffly. "I hate you!" she cried. "You do this to me to gain my favor, to save your own life! You take advantage of me! But I know you are like all men from the outside world. Tomorrow you shall follow that Malay into the Vale of Poison!"

She clapped her hands sharply, and two natives responded. A couple of minutes later Boone found himself back in the room with the barred windows. And he heard the bolt snick home.

MIDNIGHT came and went—Boone had clung to his wrist—

watch—and still he couldn't sleep for thinking of the White Princess, of Susan. The moon was full; it was the season for the monsoon to shift. Through the bars of his prison Boone could see the Valley of Death and the volcano beyond it.

From the village there was a rhythmic, barbaric roll of drums that grew steadily in volume. He pressed closer to the window and wondered if his last hour had come. A procession of natives was coming toward the house in which he was held. The whole village was on the march. He could make out young warriors and old men; ancient hags and undeveloped maidens. They came to a halt before his prison.

Then, startled, Boone saw the White Princess come forth to take her place at the head of the ritualistic ranks. She walked with queenly grace, and, padding at her side, was the great leopard, on its leash.

The picture was something that the American would never forget. The grace of the half-naked girl was comparable to that of the leopard. The movements of her body made him think of a piece of classic Greek sculpture come to life. Off she strode toward the Valley of Death, and her tribespeople trailed behind her. Obviously the time had not yet come to deal with him.

When they were out of sight of his window, Boone found his desire to follow her over-powering. Would she go through that narrow pass through which the Malay had been driven? It was rumored, he remembered, that she was able to

go unharmed into the Vale of Poison.

Boone reached into his pocket. His negligent captors had not taken his pocket knife; and his prison was constructed chiefly of bamboo. He started on the door.

The wood had toughened until its fibers were almost hard enough to turn the blade. But he persevered. First, with little shavings, then larger whittlings he kept on until he had cut a hole large enough for him to slip his hand through. He shoved back the bolt, and was free!

There was no sign of human life remaining in the village. Without even considering his chances of making his way back to the coast and his schooner, Boone set off toward the dread *Guwa Upas*.

He reached the narrow pass over which he had seen the balanced rock from the veranda, and still he had come upon no one. Taking a deep breath, he plunged into the valley.

He passed the body of the dead Malay deckhand and hurried on. Strangely, he was feeling no ill effects. A stiff wind was blowing over the valley's floor. Then Boone came to a pause abruptly. Ahead of him in the center of the valley he could see the whole tribe gathered in a semicircle. Above them on a shelf of rock the White Princess stood bathed in a pool of brilliant moonlight. The leopard was crouched at her side.

Boone could see that she was addressing her people, but the wind would not let him hear her words. Above every other sound then came a rumble from the volcano that made the earth seem to

quiver. The girl turned and disappeared into a dark grotto, but reappeared almost at once.

BOONE caught his breath in amazement. The white-skinned, golden-haired girl was now literally weighted down with ropes of gorgeous pearls. They cascaded down over her naked shoulders, absorbing life and lustre from the petal tones of her skin. They streamed proudly over her magnificent breasts, looped low over the flatness of her narrow waist, carressed even the splendor of her gleaming thighs.

There was silence from the people for a moment, a silence which was as if every person there had simultaneously caught his breath. Then drums began to throb, no louder than the murmur of a vast chorus of awe-struck human voices.

A group of naked native maidens broke from the throng in a sinuous, writhing, barbaric dance. Young men joined their ranks, until all were dancing in homage to the White Princess. Streaks of dawn were showing in the East before, at a command from the pearl-covered priestess, they stopped and filed slowly back toward the village.

BOONE had managed to keep out of sight, and now in the whole valley there were only three living things, himself, the leopard, and the girl whom he adored.

He sprang from his concealment and scrambled up to the shelf where the girl Susan stood. She whirled and the leopard bunched his muscles with a snarl. She rebuked

the animal in low tones. She spoke to the American, "Do you know that my pet would kill you if I would let him?"

Boone smiled. "But you won't let him."

"Why not?"

"Because you love me—as I love you!" He held out his arms and she came into them as if that were the most natural thing in the world. But a minute later she had pulled away again.

"Why do you affect me as no man has ever done? Who are you?"

He still held her hands. "I am John Boone. Those pearls you are wearing were stolen from my father by your father. Perhaps that will explain to you why your father was so afraid to face any one from the outside world."

She was pale and her eyes were troubled. "I be-believe you," she said. "I had been afraid of that, and I suspected it." Tears welled up and coursed down her cheeks. "I found some newspaper clippings after dad had died that hinted at it."

Boone drew her back into the comfort of his arms and kissed the tears away. "It doesn't matter, now that we have found each other," he said. "I'm going to take you back to America with me." For a long time he petted and caressed her, and she responded with an ardency that set him on fire. . . .

THERE had been a long silence when he asked her: "But tell me the secret of this valley. How is it that you and your people can come here safely?"

She smiled wanly. "Father taught me," she explained. "Twice a year when the monsoon changes, it sweeps away the poisonous gases that seep up from the ground. There are twenty-four hours then when the valley is perfectly safe. At other times, even the birds that fly over it are likely to be killed."

She paused a minute. "My father took advantage of that fact to make this grotto a hiding place for the pearls. He told me to come here twice a year on the days that are safe to keep my people in awe of my magical powers. Also he told me that the pearls' lustre would die unless they came in contact with human flesh every so often."

Her voice faded and her eyes grew wide. Boone thought he could read fear in them. "John dear—look out!" she gasped. She was staring at something over his shoulder.

Boone spun on his heel.

"Put up your hands, Mr. Boone!" The gun that pointed at Boone was held by Francia, the Portuguese owner of the schooner the American had chartered. He grinned crookedly.

"I will take the pearls," he said. "And the pretty little girl will come with me. She will like it in Singapore." He extended calloused fingers toward her naked shoulder.

The leopard snarled and the Portuguese took a backward step. It was Boone's opportunity. He lunged forward and swung from his heels. The blow caught his opponent high on the cheek-bone and staggered him.

At the same time a louder, more

menacing rumble issued from the volcano. There could be no doubt this time but that the earth trembled.

The girl screamed. "We must run! If the rock falls at the entrance to the valley, we'll all be lost. Tomorrow the valley will be filled with poisonous gas again."

The Portuguese acted first. He snatched at the girl and held her before him as a shield. His revolver menaced Boone. He started backing toward the pass.

"You will stay, Mr. Boone. You and the leopard. My ship will not have room for all of us."

A **GAIN** the ground shook and Boone could see the rock at the valley's entrance tremble. Cold sweat broke out all over him. One more such tremor and the rock would be dislodged. The volcano was still growling.

The Portuguese and Susan were almost at the pass. Suddenly the girl tore free and yelled something in Javanese. The leopard heard and leaped for Francia.

The man's gun barked again and again but the beast was barely slowed. The Portuguese broke into a panic-stricken run to one side, away from the pass to freedom. He darted behind a huge boulder and turned his gun's fire on the leopard until he had emptied it. The animal bounded high in the air and dropped—dead.

But Boone had not waited to watch the drama. Holding Susan by the hand he was streaking to the valley's only exit. As they dashed through the pass, he could hear the curses of the Portuguese

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Flow of Gold

[Continued from page 17]

the trail. Then, as he rounded a bend, his eyes widened. Dead ahead of him lay a triangular barricade of piled pipe-line lengths, thrown chest high, like a log stockade. Within the enclosure were Hardesty's nine American foremen—and with them was Felizia Cabrozon!

Of the native workers there was no sign. But the surrounding jungle teemed with Motilones, shouting hideously as they launched arrow after whirring arrow at the stockade's defenders. The clatter of arrowheads upon piled metal pipe rang above the steady blast of rifle-fire. Felizia was pelting from man to man, reloading guns, calling encouragement.

A MOTILONE loomed before Hardesty on the trail. He brought up his automatic, triggered it. The Indian sprawled backward with the top of his skull blown open. Plunging ahead, Hardesty gained the barricade, clambered over, crouched. "Felizia!"

She came to him. "I felt that there would be an attack," she said steadily. "So I went forth to scout. I know the jungle; was I not born here? I saw signs of the Motilones coming, so I ran to warn your men. The peons fled, but your Americans built this stockade—just in time."

He pressed her hand. "Brave little sweetheart!" he whispered. Then he rammed himself at an un-

defended spot on the barricade, thrust his automatic through a chink in the piled pipe. He aimed, fired, fired again and again. Spurred by his barrage, his men increased their own triggering. Bullets thwacked through the green thicket, whined like hornets in the undergrowth. For the first time, the Motilones broke; drew back.

Hardesty stood up. It was a disastrous move. A retreating savage sent an arrow at him. It whirred with rattlesnake sound; caught him in the left arm. He staggered.

Felizia crouched, pulled him down. "My dear . . . my very dear . . . !" she moaned. Swiftly she ripped at her cotton print dress to tear a strip from the skirt. The material fluttered up along her bare thighs. She tore again, and the dress split open from hem to neck. The enchanting valley between her breasts came into full view, but she seemed oblivious to her semi-nudity. Expertly she yanked a thin length of cloth from the rent; bandaged it tightly about Hardesty's bleeding arm.

As she worked over him, swelling curves softly teased his shoulder; her lips were close to his face. He kissed her. "To let you know I love you—in case we don't get out of here alive," he said.

For an ecstatic moment she clung to him. "And I love you, Tim. If there were time, I would prove it utterly, beyond all doubt . . . even though a thousand eyes

watched!" She pressed his head to her bosom, cushioning it there. "But you have fighting to do, *mi corazon*. The Motilones are coming again!"

He dragged himself away from her, his reloaded automatic in his clenched right fist. "Get set, men!" he roared. "Give 'em hell!"

Strangely, gunfire sound came from the direction of the river. That could not be the Motilones, Hardesty knew, for they possessed no firearms. He wheeled, almost tripping over an acetylene-torch outfit that had been dropped by one of the welders when the stockade was thrown up. Skirting the torch tip, from which a flicker of yellow gas-flame still tongued, he peered beyond the river side of the barricade. "Obermann!"

The German officer was crashing through the brush, firing his Luger at nothingness. Terror was in his piggish eyes as he came to the improvised breastworks and crawled over. "The Motilones! They ambushed our launches a mile down-river—wiped us out—I was the only man to escape—*Here they come!*"

It was true. The Motilones were again surging toward the beleaguered stockade. Hardesty's men raised their rifles—

"Do not fire, American swine!" Obermann yelled gutturally. He crouched in the middle of the triangle. "Do not fire, or I shall kill this girl!" He jammed his automatic against Felizia's breast.

Hardesty's throat tightened. "Why, you damnable yellow dog—"

The German grabbed a handful of Felizia's raven hair, yanked her

head back. Then he raised his voice in the Motilone dialect; addressed the oncoming attackers. "Wait! Listen to me! I have your white enemies at my mercy, O warriors! Spare my life and I shall turn all the others over to you—including this woman. Is she not fair and beautiful?" He ripped the dress from Felizia's shoulders, peeled it to her slim waist. "Is she not worth the bargain I offer?"

A MOTILONE spokesman stepped from concealment. "If your words are honest, we will deal with you. The woman will be one of my wives." He signaled, and a score of Indians clambered at the stockade; dropped down inside.

Hardesty's men stood frozen, not daring to fire at the savages for fear Obermann would send a bullet through Felizia's body. And Hardesty himself dared not risk a shot at the German, lest by accident he kill the girl he loved.

A Motilone reached for Felizia, his hand touching her. Obermann tried to shove her into the Indian's arms. She screamed—and Tim Hardesty went berserk.

He launched himself at the German, clawing and fighting like a maniac. Obermann beat him off with the Luger. Hardesty fell. His hand dropped across the metal nozzle of that sputtering oxy-acetylene torch on the end of its length of hose.

He grabbed it up, thumbing the trigger, leaped to his feet. Yellow flicker became roaring blue fire-stab that blasted outward a good twelve inches. He played the searing spray of heat full into Obermann's eyes.

The German screamed shrilly, dropped his Luger. Blinded, he tried to escape; but Hardesty followed him with doom's inexorable relentlessness. Stink of frying human flesh drifted across jungle humidity; and Oberman toppled, his brains roasted out of his skull.

The Motilones backed away. "Sorcery! Magic!" one cried. Hardesty plunged at them, yelling. He stabbed them with the blasting flame, and they dropped like bugs. Now Hardesty's men were at their rifles, firing into the terror-stricken savages. Those outside the stockade took screaming flight, cowed by the fiery deaths they had witnessed; those within the enclosure remained there—as corpses. Within three minutes, a heavy pall of silence cloaked the Magdalena lowland, broken only by the panting of triumphant American

fighting men and the harsh chatter of tropical birds overhead.

A foreman came to Tim Hardesty. "There was just one weld to go when the fight started. You've got the torch, Tim. You finish it."

Hardesty sent blue flame at the final juncture of pipe. Melted metal ran together, fused. He straightened up. "The oil line from Petrolea to Covenas is finished," he announced quietly. "Crude can flow, now."

He felt a soft touch on his arm, and he saw that Felizia had come to him. Her eyes were shining and she seemed unashamed of her torn dress, her revealed figure. "You are a man, Tim Hardesty," she said. "Twice you have saved my life. Now I am yours—forever."

"Forever," he answered, and his lips swooped to hers.

Burned Bridges

[Continued from page 97]

behind them. They reached the far end, but none too soon. As if in the throes of a death-convulsion, the earth heaved under their feet. The huge rock tottered almost over their heads. With a roar it toppled into the pass, closing it forever, cutting off from their ears the frenzied shrieks of the man who was imprisoned behind it—as surely doomed to death as any criminal

sentenced to a lethal gas chamber.

BOONE turned to the lovely girl with whom he had escaped. "Susan, darling!" he whispered. In the reaction to what had happened, they clung to each other as if they would never let go.

Then, hand in hand, easy in their hearts, they turned their backs on the Vale of Poison forever.



Woman From Mercury

[Continued from page 33]

"I'll set the dirt-dobbers on you!" Hartman threatened.

Sam came to a standstill, mumbling.

"We're taking her to Washington in the plane," said Hartman.

"Come on then!" shouted Paul.

"Come on then!" echoed the woman.

"Glory Mighty, boss, lookit!" yelled Sam.

OUT of the intensity of shadow behind the rocks something came tumbling. It was an immense ball, perhaps twelve feet in diameter. A yell of terror broke from the negro's lips.

"It's them dirt-dobbers come back! They're gangin' up on us!" Sam shrieked.

Even Hartman, cold-blooded scientist though he was, looked in fear at the slowly revolving thing that was approaching them. The ball consisted of a great number of the swarm, once more shrunken to the size and aspect of giant cucumbers. The limbs had shriveled to mere excrescences. The creatures were reduced to a single, shapeless mass of units, yet all animated by the same infernal intelligence as they directed their course toward the woman.

"They've agglutinated to regain vitality, like the paramcium, the slipper animalcule, when the vitality of the race is waning," shouted Hartman.

"Hold her!" yelled Paul.

He grabbed at the woman. But she was making no effort to escape. She was leaning toward the ball in an attitude suggestive of a protective mother.

"She's the queen of the swarm!" cried Hartman, suddenly understanding.

Sam uttered another screech of terror. For, in the presence of the queen, the outer shell of the ball began to swell. It bubbled; the clustered things upon the rim of it began to stir. Out of the amorphous tissue, pseudopods appeared and were withdrawn. Buds began to round themselves into heads, which displayed black dots of eyes and gashes of leering mouths. And the whole mass was pulsating with a dreadful synchronization, as if attempting to disintegrate into its separate monads, and yet lacking the power.

Now, from every side, other balls appeared, all moving toward the queen. There was something nerve-wracking in the slow and deliberate motion of those masses, dipping into the hollows of the ground, stretching over rocks, changing shape each instant, to cover the irregularities of the ground, yet always resuming their globular shape.

The little group was almost ringed. The queen was sneding out a twittering, plaintive call through the curtain of shimmering vapor that hung before her.

"The scow!" shouted Hartman.

He grasped the queen and raced over the rocks toward the water, the rest following. From every side the agglutinated balls came rolling downhill after them.

HARTMAN dashed through a gap between two immense balls, from the sides of which stumps of limbs protruded toward him, and shapeless stumps of fingers twitched. Sam was howling at the top of his lungs. In front of him, Hartman saw the scow. It had been stranded and mud-filled, and tossed by the flood that the advent of the swarm had created in the lake, but the rope had held.

Paul leaped in front of him and snatched the queen from him. Hartman released her. Norma was at his side, holding him on the balance of sanity. He slipped his arm around her. He stumbled on.

The three men leaped aboard the scow. Hartman thrust Norman into the bow. Paul was holding the queen. Sam seized the long pole, which fortunately still lay in the bottom of the boat. Paul unfastened the rope that moored her to a large rock. Sam dug the pole into the oozy bottom and pushed off.

The rocks above were rimmed with the great balls, squirming and squeezing one another. Others, rolling up from behind, mounted upon those already in position. Then suddenly the whole mass came bouncing down toward the scow.

Sam poled like a madman

toward the shore. He thrust the scow into the bank, and they ran inland. Behind them the balls were bobbing on the water. The air was clear and fresh, but all the trees were dead, and the ground was littered with dry leaves.

Sam darted for the barn, flung open the door, and began to drag out the plane. Suddenly the queen leaped at Norma, fingers extended like claws. She struggled so fiercely that it was all Paul could do to hold her.

"Get her into the plane," yelled Hartman.

"Into the plane," she echoed.

The balls were bobbing along the shore. Hartman glanced back, saw them rolling through the dry leaves. But Sam had got the motor started. It spluttered and died, and then began to purr smoothly.

Hartman swung Norma into the rear seat. Paul dumped the queen in front beside him. Sam clung to a wing. One of the balls was close beside the plane, and a figure seemed to detach itself from the agglutination, and evolve into a dwarf youth, perfect save for the head. The queen twittered, and tried to break from her place.

But Paul gunned the motor. The plane dashed two of the balls aside, ran through a glade, reached a strip of flat land beside the water, and took off.

She rose into the air, free upper air, under the brilliant moon.

SEATED beside Norma, feeling her warm body against him, Hartman seemed to be recovering from a nightmare. He had been

on the track of the problem from the first. He had guessed that the swarm might exhale oxygen at night, as the plant exhales carbon dioxide. But he hadn't known that it was the queen he held captive. Now everything was growing clear. The life of the swarm depended upon that form in the front cockpit. It was incredible, but it was true.

On the analogy of the bee, she would be the mother of the swarm, but analogies were always dangerous things. And reproduction was by budding. Nature had an infinite number of tricks up her sleeve. Nevertheless, Hartman was confident that the swarm was dependant upon the queen.

She looked substantial enough. Flesh, bone, and blood, to all outward appearance, though Hartman believed that she was actually composed of oxygen in some compressed form, on the analogy of the dwarf stars, in which a cubic inch of matter may weigh a hundred tons.

Hartman saw Paul slip one arm around her. He saw the queen's eyes fixed on Paul's. He saw the stark despair upon her face. He knew that she was torn between desire for the swarm and that human love that she had never known. He knew this was one of those turning-points of Nature, as when she made the bird from the reptile, and the mammal from the marsupial. And he knew that the queen must die, that human life might not be diverted from the form that it had taken.

The expression on Paul's face

was fanatical. What was passing through his mind?

"We're going places, old girl!" Paul shouted.

"Going places, old girl," answered the queen.

Hartman knew that they must be outside the zone of the swarm by dawn, or death would be almost instantaneous. He wondered whether the swarm had reached Washington. He realized that they had been cut off from all contact with the world for days. And he hadn't even brought a radio transmitting set with him. He had wanted to work out the problem alone. There were points that were still obscure.

"The queen is the balance-wheel of a single organic body," he mused. "She must give out sufficient oxygen by night to keep the swarm from shrinking back into the primitive nucleus. That is why it clusters about her. Oxygen, for them, means life and a kind of primitive consciousness. But then—"

The plane was flying slowly, at about two hundred and fifty miles an hour. Those old-fashioned gas planes, archaic survivals though they were, had proved their worth. They were slow, but they were steady. Hartman's plane had belonged to his father, who used to commute from Kingston to New York. Hartman looked down. They were flying along the edge of what seemed to be the straight line of the swarm's resting-place, though in reality it was an immense circle.

That line cut off the ravaged from the unravaged territory as if it had been drawn with a giant

ruler. It was the line between the desert and the sown, between the combed and civilized earth and utter desolation. On the one side were fields of corn, on the other desert, or the dead stumps of leafless trees. Even the plaster had fallen from the exterior of houses, and the black huddle of towns was unlighted and deserted.

Hartman's apprehensions increased. He must get Congress together, notify them that he was on the track of the problem but hadn't solved it.

But suppose the swarm had overcome Washington? In that case Hartman could foresee only the complete disintegration of society. There would no longer be a national nucleus of resistance.

His plan was to have the capital removed to the Middle West, to ask to be made head of the various bodies of scientists, and to work out the problem before the swarm arrived. Perhaps the Mississippi would stay it. Would it be necessary to go so far?

That was Baltimore, that great senseless mass of brick and stone beside the sea. The seaward portion of the town seemed to be in ruins, as if struck by a tidal wave. They were flying over Maryland, and now there was nothing but destruction underneath; they had left the edge of normal life behind them.

Then of a sudden lights appeared in the distance. Here and there pin-pricks of light, surrounding a blazing cluster in the centre. The brown of death had given place to grass and foliage again. It was as if a hand had

traced the demarcation with pencil and ruler. Washington was still alive. That blaze of lights indicated the Capitol, and Congress must be in session.

An exultant cry broke from Hartman's throat. He could see a small crowd gather about the plane as it swooped down. There was a scattering, and the plane came to rest under the massive buildings and the great dome.

IN the Senate, under the glare of the electric lights, President Thompson was saying: "When the Gauls had invaded Italy, and were threatening Rome, I have read that the senators refused to join the multitude in flight, and awaited the appearance of the barbarians in their seats. I believe they were all massacred.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the Senate of these United States, we have a great tradition behind us. Let us be worthy of it. Let us await our destiny here. That destiny may be upon us at any moment now."

But the Senators sprang to their feet as loud cries were heard. Next morning Hartman, Paul Leavitt, and black Sam were ushered in, together with Norma and the queen.

"It's terrible!" shrieked the lady senator from Connecticut. "I can't stand it! Take her away!" And promptly fainted.

Senator Burton, of Florida, was on the job. He tore off his overcoat and flung it about the queen.

Hartman shouted, "I'm Hartman! You remember me! I'm

bringing news. I've discovered —"

President Thompson held up his hand for silence. "Please step forward," he said. "But we can't permit this—er—lady—"

"She ain't no lady," yelled Sam Douglas. "She's a ha'nt. She's leadin' that gang of dirt-dobbers that's been stirrin' up all this trouble. Lady? Huh, I've seed too many ladies."

"Shut up!" said Hartman, and black Sam slumped into silence.

"Mr. President," said Hartman, "I have been making my investigations at Lake Champlain. I believe I am on the track of a discovery that will rid the world of this menace. These organisms, which, I may now admit, seem to have entered our space-ship on the occasion of our recent visit to Mercury, live upon oxygen. Quiescent on Mercury for countless aeons, after that planet lost its atmosphere, they have been galvanized into activity on Earth."

"This woman is their queen. But she is not human. She is the queen of the swarm, and approximates more closely to the human organism than any of them. Nevertheless, I repeat, she is not human. She is Nature's effort to approximate to the human type as—to give a single instance—Nature attempted to reproduce the camel in the deserts of Peru, and only got as far as the llama. Nature is imitative, but blind, and not always successful."

"In some way the fate of the swarm is bound up with the queen. We must hold her and investigate."

"I'll do the holding," inter-

rupted Paul, with a loud laugh. "I'll see to it. She's mine."

"I'll see to it. She's mine," echoed the queen, leaning against Paul Leavitt's shoulder.

On their feet, the stupefied Senators looked from one man to the other. Some of the younger ones looked at the queen's shapely legs beneath the overcoat.

Hartman, disregarding the interruption, continued: "For the present, I see no remedy. But I have made one discovery. The swarm remains quiescent at night, shrinking back into an innocuous nucleus. By daylight it will again be in full activity. By daylight it will be upon Washington. Everybody who is left in the capital must evacuate it instantly, and make his way westward. I propose to establish a new center of research across the Mississippi, which may stay the advance of the invaders—"

He broke off as cries of terror sounded all about the Capitol. The Senators, silent in their places, waited. All guessed what these portended. All were awaiting the sudden inrush of flameless heat, the swift and mercifully instantaneous suffocation.

"You must all flee," Hartman shouted. "The pest advances no more swiftly than a man can walk. There is no time to waste. Mr. President, I—"

A door burst inward with a crash. There were other crashes, screams, shouting—

And, as if self-propelled, and exercising an irresistible momentum, a huge agglomeration of the man-cucumbers rolled along the

floor toward where the queen stood.

THERE were others. There were innumerable balls of the agglutinated monsters, breaking through every door and lower window, followed by no one. Huge, moving masses that were horribly alive.

Above the tumult the calm voice of President Thompson was heard, "Gentlemen, we will remain in our places."

"There's still time," cried Hartman desperately. "They'll be innocuous till the sun rises!"

But the balls were rolling down the aisles, they were choking every exit, they were beginning to clamber upon one another, so that the Senators sat half-concealed behind mounds composed of squirming holothurian humans. And always the balls proceeded toward the queen, throwing out pseudopods that moved them forward, until the three men were surrounded by a mounting wall. And out of this wall leering faces appeared and vanished, and stumps of malformed arms were extended, to be drawn back into the texture of the primal mass.

Paul's cry rang through the House. "He's right. Escape, all of you, while you can!" he shouted wildly. "This woman is mine. I love her, and I'll take my chance with her."

"I'll take my chance with her," piped the queen.

Paul flung himself on Hartman. "She's mine, I say!" he raved. "You wanted her for yourself, and hid her away, but I saved her. This is my love from the dawn of

time. I'm going to rule the earth with her. King and queen! No more people!"

A ball that had been clambering above a little pile, and formed the apex of a pyramid, suddenly dropped. It made a hollow, splashing sound upon the floor. Sam's fear-crazed voice rang out:

"Boss, boss! They're dyin'! Them dirt-dobbers is dyin'! They're witherin' away!"

It was true. Suddenly, almost in a moment, it could be seen that the globular masses were shrinking, losing vitality. They were lessening in size, their contour was growing ragged. The movements within their masses were growing weaker. The features of the knob-like heads could no longer be distinguished. There was an internal bubbling, like a fermentation, that was reducing the balls to a sort of amorphous magma, like the chrysalis before its reconstruction into the imago.

Suddenly Hartman sprang forward, flinging off Paul, and his voice rang loud and triumphant through the Senate hall.

"We're saved!" he shouted.

"Glory Mighty be!"

"We're saved, I tell you! I half envisioned this, but I dared not let myself believe. These things come from that part of Mercury that is in alternate light and darkness. Then they would have a life cycle roughly proportioned to the period of light on that portion of Mercury. That life cycle has ended. It was not the night, it was the approach of death that brought about the agglutination, as in the paramecium.

Then the secret lies with the queen. She alone can produce a new swarm of these holothurian monsters. She alone—"

Paul leaped before her. "You shall not harm her!" he shouted. "She's mine! She's mine, I say!"

There was none among the stunned Senators but would remember that scene for the remainder of his days. The two men facing each other before the wraith-like queen, who again seemed to be growing misty, Sam trembling behind Hartman—and something more that not everybody saw.

For, out of the squirming, dying mass of monsters, now almost shapeless protoplasm upon the floor, there emerged the head and torso of a young man. To the waist he presented clean-cut, well-formed flesh; below, he was one with the universal substance of the dissolving ball. Muscles were knotted, as if it was only with a herculean effort that he had succeeded in attaining to materialization.

SOME there were who saw, and remembered long afterward how, for a few moments, that rigid head and torso of the young man, with features like a Greek god's, stood out from the dissolving mass of the ball. They saw the queen slowly turn her gaze from Paul Leavitt's face and fix it on the youth's. They saw the youth look back at her.

And it was as if the queen was torn in twain between longing for the earth man, of the earth life she had never attained to, and remembrance of the youth who

might, on Mercury, aeons before, in some way incomprehensible to mortals, have been her lover.

It lasted only two or three moments. Then the torso dissolved, and the balls were no larger than footballs, still writhing feebly, but dissolving into splotches on the carpet.

Paul cried, "She's mine! Get out of here, all of you! Get out, I say!" He shook his fist at President Thompson, who watched him gravely and silent from the Vice-President's seat.

And he grasped the queen about the waist and drew her toward him.

The scream of horror that broke from black Sam's lips was taken up by all the Senators. They sprang from their seats, arms outstretched, faces frozen to stone.

For the slender queen elongated, and suddenly broke into two pieces at the waist.

Two pieces that almost instantly budded into the full stature of humanity. Two women now, identical, looking at Paul, who recoiled, thrusting out his hands before him.

Hartman sprang forward. "Kill them!" he shouted.

The horror held all motionless. And then, with unbelievable swiftness, the two queens elongated and divided. There were four queens. There would be eight in a moment, all identical, a new swarm. . . .

"Kill them!" came in faint throaty mimicry from four women's throats.

Hartman shouted, "They reproduce by fissure. There will be a whole colony in fifteen minutes,

a fresh swarm, ready to overrun the earth. Kill them!"

It is not for nothing that the gigantic statue of that fiery Senator, Jackson Harrison Street, which stands before the Senate House, is inscribed, "He Saved Humanity." The Senator was a conservative gentleman who believed in Southern customs, among which he enumerated the carrying of a six-gun, an item indispensable—he claimed—to the wardrobe of every gentleman.

It was Senator Street whose

gun rang sharp staccato through the House, and each slug found its target. Before the four queens could become eight, they lay lifeless on the floor, among the vestiges of the balls.

Paul, gibbering insanely, crouched among them. Hartman held the swooning Norma in his arms. Then Sam's voice shrilled:

"Glory Mighty! I knowed dem old dirt-dobbers couldn't down you, boss. I knowed you'd lay dem ha'nts. Glory Mighty, it's mornin'!"

Once An Outlaw

[Continued from page 49]

"For Pepe," she said, putting her arm about the aviator, "we are honestly in love, Ramon and I! For me he has sacrificed everything, his future with this gang! For—he stole the plates and gave them to me! We flew here from Torreon, bringing my father, hoping to trade those plates for our safe conduct across the border! This we could not do, the government would not compromise! Now the gang has located us. They have gotten my poor father, they will torture him, and he does not even know where the plates are!"

"And the ticket you cashed this morning at the bank?"

"We needed money," she said, her head high, her breasts rising and falling proudly. "We meant to make a run for it tonight. With a letter press we made the one ticket, we tuned in a radio to the

proper station and got the coded winners. That gave us time to prepare the ticket, Pepe. Will you help us get my father?"

"You know where to go!"

Ramon Torres answered stiffly, "The gang has a headquarters here. We can only go there and offer to make a deal. To trade the plates back to them for the safety of Jeffrey Blue."

Now the Sabinas Kid knew this was like to sticking their heads in the mouth of the lion. He also knew that he could not get his pardon—which, in spite of his scorn he really wanted—without possessing those plates himself! He shrugged, and to shrug in such a manner meant yes, with the Sabinas Kid.

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three, the Kid, Janice Blue and Ramon Torres wheeled their shabby roadster into the patio. From the time they alit they knew they were covered by guns, knew that watchful eyes were upon them. Nevertheless they rang the bell, were admitted by an evil faced *mozo*, who escorted them into an inner room and left them.

Impatiently they awaited. Presently a bland Oriental voice said, "*Señorita* Blue, *Señores* Torres and Gardinia, or should I say the Sabinas Kid? It is well that you have come. We expected you, as a matter of fact. Now you will lay any weapons you might possess on the table, then stand against the wall. You are covered by a machine gun."

The Kid grinned, followed Torres to the table, carefully laid his gold-mounted gun beside the automatic of the aviator.

"*Señorita*," commanded the voice that seemed to issue from nowhere at all?

Unwillingly, she too advanced. Her fingers plucked at the hem of her skirt, the skirt lifted higher, over her silken knee, high up on her thigh. A small .25 was strapped there. This joined the others on the table.

The silent *mozo* came in and removed the weapons. As he left, an opposite door opened to admit a small, weazened Chinaman, clad in western clothing. He bowed ceremoniously.

Torres said, sullenly, "Chin Lee!"

"Chin Lee," agreed the Oriental. "And you, of course, are the traitor Ramon Torres." Torres

flushed angrily. Chin Lee went on, unperturbed. "We were fortunate enough to chance upon your father in a *cantina* not long ago, *señorita*. Evidently he eluded your watch. We thought you would come willingly to trade for his safety."

"Is he all right?" she asked breathlessly. "What have you done to him? Believe me, he doesn't know where those plates are."

"He is quite all right—and quite happy. If you will follow me?"

They followed him, the three of them, down a stone corridor, where he threw open a barred door. The Sabinas Kid was startled at the gaunt appearance of Jeffrey Blue, who lay as a dead man on the bed. Except that it is not the usual thing for dead men to snore.

"He is quite happy," said the Chinaman, "quite drunk. Now we go into the next room. He will not be disturbed, for his last drink was deeply doped."

In the next room he faced the three of them. "And now we deal, no? Your father for those plates."

Torres said, "What guarantee do we have that we will be allowed to leave? Maybe you'll take the plates and somehow kill us all anyway."

"A chance you must assume," the Oriental assured them.

The Sabinas Kid snapped his fingers. He sneered openly at the Chinaman. "Chin Lee, or whatever you call yourself, I do not like the Chinese at all. To me they are store keepers, runners of opium houses. These people know nothing. And I, who know all, refuse to deal with a yellow man."

CHIN LEE'S eyes were venomous. Before he could answer, the Kid went on, "What do I care for Blue's life? You know very well life means nothing to me. But I know where those plates are. These people do not even know that already I have stolen them. Now will you summon the man who calls himself *Coronel Roque Reyno*. With him only will I deal."

Chin Lee simply stared at him. The Kid laughed in his face. "This hoax has gone far enough," he snapped. "No doubt the real Reyno started from Mexico City on this mission. But you and your gang intercepted him. Reyno was a *zurdo*, a left handed man. Your faked *Coronel* is right handed, for I saw him shoot. Also the real Reyno was immensely fat and jovial! You killed him, this man of the bad ear took his place. You enlisted my aid to find the Blues and Torres, and even while your man was propositioning me at the *Banco Nacional*, the luck of the Sabinas Kid held good! Janice walked in to cash a ticket." He rocked with laughter. "I wonder what your men thought of it."

The man with the carved ear stepped into the room, bearing a heavy automatic in his hand. He smiled, like a death's head. "You are astute, *Señor Kid*," he smiled. "You must remember, however, that I was in the Valdez office, I did not see the sweet Janice enter so boldly to cash her ticket. We stood, you and I, on the *banco* steps, together, and I fired at the policeman who desired your life. It was only afterward that I saw her, and realized that we did not have need of your talents in locat-



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ing the Blue family. Now, of course we realize that we do not need you, as I said before. Yes, you are astute. I killed Roque Reyno and took his papers. You know that. Which means, you know too much!"

"I know too much about your plates," said the Kid bluntly, still bluffing. "I—"

"Look out," screamed Janice. The Kid whirled, saw the contorted face of the man who had driven him in a taxi, yet in spite of dodging, the heavy blow from the loaded quirt butt caught him. He fought for consciousness and found it was no use. Blackness descended upon him.

HIS head was a raging cauldron of pain when he awakened. Hands, shaking hands, were rubbing his wrists, a quivering voice was saying, "Awake, Kid, awake! You must!" He opened his eyes to peer into the bleary blue eyes of Jeffrey Blue. He sat up.

Blue said, "Damn them! They thought they had me doped. Drunken, yes, but I didn't take the dope! For the love of God, tell them where those damnable plates are hidden. Listen, and have mercy!"

A scream, undeniably issuing from the lips of Janice Blue filled the room. They heard her scream, "No! No! I tell you I don't know where they are!"

And Torres' frantic voice, "Tell them, my dear! You took them from me! It isn't worth it! Tell them!"

"I don't know!" It faded again into a scream of agony.

Jeffrey Blue drew himself up.

He muttered, "For me, a drunken, no good father she suffers that!" He straightened his bent body, his body warped by vice. "You, Kid, you feel all right?"

The Kid nodded.

"You are afraid to battle three men, providing you have a gun?"

"Certainly not. Nor thirty!"

Straight to the door walked Jeffrey Blue. He hammered upon it. He called, "This farce has gone far enough. I alone know where those plates are. Open the door and let me out, I'll talk."

The Sabinas Kid moved to the side of the door, out of sight. Slowly it swung open. The man of the crippled ear stood there, gun in hand. "Come out, Blue, with your hands raised. God help you if you don't k—!"

Blue launched himself through the air. The gun boomed. You could actually hear the impact of the bullet on flesh, yet he kept going. Both his hands gripped the gun. It boomed again, knocked him to his knees, and still he clung.

The Sabinas Kid leaped forward. His right fist staggered the man who called himself Reyno. His hands grasped the gun, wrenched it away from the fighters, he fired across the room at his ex-taxi driver. The man went down. He leaned to clip the false Reyno across the pate and keep him on the floor. Something flew through the air from the hand of the Oriental. A knife buried itself in the flesh of the Kid's left arm. Very calmly, paying no attention to the wound, he raised the gun. While it was not his own gold mounted weapon, he had no trouble at all in placing

a slug directly between those brown almond eyes.

He drew the knife from his arm, cut Torres loose from the chair where he was bound. Janice Blue was spreadeagled on a cot, most of her clothes torn from her, and circling her breasts, as if drawn by a pen dipped in red ink, were the marks of the Chinaman's knife.

As he cut her loose and she flew to her father, Torres by her side, a great clattering was heard in the hallway. The Kid raised the gun. A voice called, "It is the law! We enter!"

And with the law was Diamantita! Eyes ablaze she walked to the Kid. "You! You great lout, to leave me for that passionless bag of flour! But I follow you, and it is well for you that I did! This is a bad house, and this I knew! It was I, Diamantita who save your life! I call the *guardias*!"

A hand plucked at the Kid's sleeve. He left a blazing eyed Diamantita where she was, withdrew to listen to Janice's sobbing talk. "*Madre de Dios*," he said, "and if you knew all the time where these plates were, why did you suffer torture?"

She seemed amazed at the question. "Why," she faltered, "I had brought you along for emergencies. You always get out of difficulties, do you not? You are Jose Maria Gardinia Guedea, the Sabinas Kid!"

"The greatest fool in the world," he said bitterly.

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lay on the desk before him. The police had verified the fact that one Pablo Gonzales, alias Coronel Roque Reyno had talked, and implicated the entire ring. Grudgingly he said, "Here is your money, *señor*, here is your pardon. I have the plates, and what is this?"

"A souvenir," said the Kid, unwrapping the package.

Never had the Banker Valdez received such a package. For it contained an ear, a human ear! And the lobe was completely sliced off. The ear of the false Reyno!

"To remember me by," said the Kid softly. "And now, as for this!" He took the pardon and threw it in the wastepaper basket. "*Señor*, you are a banker, safe and secure. But me, the Sabinas Kid, I cannot visualize life with no spice, life with no one after me! Tell the government I disdain their pardon. Tell them tonight I meet Diamantita, Diamantita and life!"

Through the open window came the roar of an airplane, dipping down in farewell toward the bank. That, the Kid knew, was Janice Blue and Ramon Torres headed for the *Estados Unidos*.

The banker said coldly, "A fine gesture, *amigo*. But useless. You

know that I merely have to notify Mexico City and the pardon goes on record, whether you keep your copy or not!"

The Kid threw back his head and laughed. "Tonight, life and Diamantita! And something else, *Señor* Banker!" The gold mounted gun flashed from the holster. "I do not think I have enough money, so from you, I shall take, let us say, 100,000 pesos for your fat life!"

In five short minutes he had it. *Señor* Banker Valdez sat bound and gagged in an easy chair placed in a closet. "Tomorrow," said the Kid mockingly, "I will be back in my beloved hills, richer by far, and with another adventure behind me. Tomorrow, your employees will find you. If you care to recommend my complete pardon after this—!" He kissed his fingers, tossed the kiss into the air.

The door closed on the fearful Valdez. But through it he heard the Kid singing, something about life being a big and passionate woman named Diamantita, who should be taken regularly, but not too regularly to make her lose her savor.

Valdez was angry. But Valdez was resigned.

Fire Mountain

[Continued from page 61]

Nan Vevera. He knew Schmitt had a revolver and McPherson had also mentioned a machine gun. On his hands and knees he crawled up the steps to the porch. The front room was empty but one of the trunks stood ajar and he could see

the dials of a radio apparatus. A light burned on the rear sleeping porch and Steve thought he heard a muted plaint.

He opened the screened door silently and slipped inside the cottage. Someone was on the sleep-

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ing porch. He could hear heavy breathing. Hugging the wall he moved along the narrow hallway to the rear of the house. Suddenly a shrill, hysterical scream rocked the thatched roof and before the echoes of it died a man swore gutturally.

Throwing caution to the winds Steve leaped for the door of the sleeping porch and saw what he had expected to see. Nan Vevera, her cotton dress ripped almost to shreds, was sprawled on a cot, held there by Franz Schmitt's huge hands. Still conscious, she writhed and kicked desperately to avoid the German's filthy caresses but his groping brutal fingers found her and tore away the material that ineffectually covered her.

For a timeless moment Steve was frozen by the lurid picture and in that moment Schmitt took warning. He shot erect, his eyes glowing specks, and saliva drooling from the corners of his sensuous mouth. In the dim, yellow light of the oil lamp he at first failed to recognize Steve but, when he did, his mouth gaped open and his flushed cheeks went pale. This was the man he had shot down—the man whose dead body he had seen carried aboard the island steamer! Panic seized him and he backed away, terror of the unknown mirrored in his piggish eyes.

Steve sensed the German's reaction and the reason for it. He pointed an accusing finger. "You can't escape, Schmitt! You're doomed!"

Like a man gone mad, Schmitt screamed and lunged at what he thought was a ghostly apparition. Steve knew that with his bullet-

punctured chest he was no match for the burly German at close quarters. He side-stepped and struck with his right fist. The blow landed high on Schmitt's head but there was force enough behind it to stun him and throw him off balance. Steve moved in quickly and drove a short, hard blow to the still swollen point of the German's jaw. The man's head snapped back and he went down with a crash, conscious but paralyzed, unable to gain his feet.

There was a revolver on a table between the two cots and Steve went for it but never reached it. A fearful explosion rocked the cottage as though it were made of paper, hurling him to the floor. He picked himself up, shaken but unhurt. There was a rumble as though of distant thunder. The atmosphere had suddenly become unbearably hot.

Nan Vevera, seated on the edge of a cot, pointed down the hallway. "Look!" she cried.

Steve's eyes followed the direction of her trembling finger and his heart leaped to his throat. *Gunong Api* had erupted! Fire and molten lava belched from its crater and was sweeping down the mountain-side making flaming torches of the nutmeg trees in its path! The sky above the seething volcano was blood red, as though the heavens, themselves, were on fire.

"Quickly!" Steve cried, reaching for Nan's hand. "There's a boat at the dock!"

THE flaming lava was near the base of the volcanic peak as they stepped off the porch. Hordes of Malaysians and Chinese swarmed

toward the shore, forgetting in their panic that death lurked in the dark waters. Running wildly, Steve and Nan reached the dock. The life boat was gone!

"Mac!" Steve shouted. "Mac, where are you?" Clouds of black smoke pouring from Fire Mountain had obscured the moon and he could see nothing in the dense blackness. "Mac! Mac!" His voice rose to a shrill frenzy.

Then, out of the black came the slap of oars. A moment later the prow of the boat struck the piling. Steve looked behind him. The lava had covered the flat and was within a foot of the dock. Lifting Nan up he swung her into the boat and dropped down beside her. "Row, Mac!" he cried, shoving off.

He could feel his eyebrows shriveling from the awful heat. Leaning over he wet his hands and passed them over Nan's face and his own. McPherson bent his back to the oars and in a moment they were out of danger, pulling further and further away from where the molten lava was dropping into the water and sending up great clouds of steam.

On his knees, Steve held Nan close to him. The unearthly cries of the trapped natives gradually faded off as either Fire Mountain or the shark-infested waters claimed them one by one and soon there was only the rumble of the volcano and the hissing of steam.

"It's horrible!" Nan whispered. "They—they prayed for it and—and it came!"

Steve nodded. *Gunong Api* had wrecked its vengeance on all of Banda Island. Gold and men were buried forever in an ageless tomb.

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Created He Them

[Continued from page 87]

bound when he saw her and realized that she was safe, unharmed.

"Then you succeeded!" she cried.

"In everything. I killed my anti-self. Now we'll put your father under restraint, get rid of your atomic twin—and everything will be finished."

She glided into his embrace, her eyes veiled by long dark lashes. "My dear . . . my very dear. . ." she whispered, and held up her parted lips for the questing pressure of his mouth. Her nylasilk toga slipped down over her dimpled white shoulders.

He stiffened, stared. "You're not Heln!"

"Wh-why—what makes you say—?"

His fingers clamped around her arms. "The marks on your throat—my *kiss-marks!*" he snarled. "You're the anti-Heln—the one who was with me in the brokerage office!"

"No! Let me go! I—"

"You thought you killed me with your Y-ray! And when you saw me flying in just now, you naturally figured I must be my twinself coming back from a murder job! And when you saw your mistake you tried to trap me by pretending to be Heln!" He shook her savagely, vengefully.

Somehow she broke away from him. The toga ripped; came away in his hands. Nude, she turned and raced into the laboratory; screamed at the top of her lungs. "Master—Master Vult!"

Jon Ad caromed after her. He

caught her; spun her around. Death-terror was in her soulless eyes; fear transfigured her face into a hideous mask. "No—no!" she shrieked as Jon Ad's hands went to her throat.

For an instant he hesitated, repelled at the thing he knew he must do. She was so much like the real Heln—so completely Heln's twin-counterpart—that killing her was like slaying Heln herself. A pang of ugly doubt stabbed him. Suppose this really *were* Heln? Suppose he was throttling his own beloved bride-to-be?

But the tiny red mouth-marks on her neck and shoulders dispelled his qualms. This was the one who had lured him to his brokerage office for the sake of burglary and murder; this was the one he had caressed. . .

. . . And she deserved death, had no real right to exist. She lacked soul; she was an evil creation of electronically-stolen atoms—of molecules pilfered from the genuine Heln. To allow her to live would be a crime in the face of Nature, Jon Ad told himself. He began strangling her.

She clawed at him, kicked him, tried to break away. His thumbs shut off her wild and hellish cries; he bent her backward, blinding himself to the lush beauty of her. "Now—!" he grunted.

Somebody roared: "Yes. Now!" It was Wilm Vult, and he had his Y-ray gun lifted. Drawn by the anti-Heln's cries, he had raced along the corridor, his eyes blaz-

ing, his beard dribbling the saliva of fury.

Jon Ad saw the gun. He hurled himself aside. A blue puff belched from the weapon. But instead of striking Jon Ad, it impacted against the soft white flesh of Heln Vult's evil twinself. The creature screamed once; then she sagged, dropped. You couldn't see any wounds on her perfect body, but you knew what had happened to her. Beneath that fair skin, her organs were disintegrating into putrescent slime. . . .

"Damnation!" the mad Vult yelled. He tried to trigger a ray-charge at Jon Ad. But Jon Ad had already hurled himself at the scientist. In a low flying tackle, he slammed full-tilt into the maniac's knees. Both men went down in a flurrying tangle of fists and feet, kicks and punches. The Y-ray weapon skittered down the hall and lay there beyond Vult's reach.

IT WAS brawn against brawn, now; strength matched to strength, with inevitable death for the loser. Jon Ad realized it; knew his life was at stake—and Heln's life as well. Maybe Heln was already dead; maybe her father had slain her during the night. The thought sent a sudden spate of raging stamina into Jon Ad's thews. He struck out blindly; felt his knuckles split open as they smashed into Vult's bared, fang-like teeth.

The bearded man bellowed in pain; probed his fingers toward Jon Ad's eyes. "I'll blind you, by God! I'll blind you—I'll pluck out your damned eyeballs by the roots!"

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Jon Ad averted his head, freed himself of Vult's grasp, rolled over. Vult scrambled to his feet; aimed a murderous kick at his enemy's skull.

It grazed Jon Ad—and stunned him. In reflex defense he grabbed the heavier man's ankle; yanked it. Vult came tumbling down on top of him, his massive body pressing the breath from Jon Ad's tortured lungs.

The battlers were locked together again, now. Jon Ad felt the madman's arms going around him to crush him. Vult was far the stronger, he knew. Once that bear-like grip was fastened on . . . well, it would be Jon Ad's finish. He realized it. "Damn you, Vult!" he wheezed. And he jammed his knees and elbows against the bearded maniac; exerted the ultimate ounce of his waning strength.

Vult's hold broke. Before he could try it again, Jon Ad's fists were triphammers that pistoned punch after smashing punch into the scientist's blood-smeared face. Clinching, both men came to their feet. Jon Ad bashed himself free, arose on his toes, swung a pile-driver uppercut full to his enemy's whiskered chin.

The aching thud of it arrowed up Jon Ad's arm, almost dislocated his shoulder. But even as he winced under the pain, he knew he had dealt Wilm Vult his death-stroke. It isn't nice to know you've killed a man with your bare fist; it's something you'll carry with you until you die. Especially when your victim happens to be the father of the girl you love. . .

But Jon Ad knew there could

have been no other way. He saw Vult stagger; saw the stupid glassiness that filmed the madman's dulling eyes. Abrupt gouts of blood spewed from Vult's nostrils and mouth and ears; his tortured, twisted brain had burst under the savage impact of that last blow, and now even his eyes were hemorrhaging. He fell backward, very slowly; and when at length he lay at Jon Ad's feet, no movement stirred him.

This time Wilm Vult was really dead; there would be no more resurrection.

LIMPING, stumbling, half-blind-
ed, Jon Ad dragged himself wearily along the corridor. Presently he reached the prison-chamber where he himself had been fettered the night before; the room from which the fraudulent twin-Heln had pretended to rescue him. The place had another occupant now; a sweetly-smiling, golden-haired prisoner who lay deeply slumbering on the cot, her azure eyes closed, her enchanting breasts rising and falling gently with each drugged breath. Jon Ad could see those dainty charms, where Heln's white toga had slipped open; he could see her flawless throat, marred by no kiss-marks, and he noticed that there was no ray-gun strapped to her creamy thigh. . .

He leaned over her and kissed her lightly, on the lips. She stirred; her lashes fluttered. Dully, then, she looked up at him. "Jon . . . Jon Ad. . . !"

It was a good hour before she was thoroughly revived. Then he told her all that had happened dur-

ing the night. "And now it's finished," he ended. "We'll take the stolen currency down to the office, put it back in the vault before anyone else shows up. My own twinself is dead past all identifying; your anti-twin will never be found."

"You mean . . . ?"

"The world needn't know about your father," Jon Ad said as he took her into his arms. "History thinks he died four years ago. We'll let it rest that way."

Then he took Heln out of the plioglass building; stopped only long enough to pick up Wilm Vult's Y-ray gun. Out in the clearing he turned; aimed the ray toward the shining laboratory. The solaroid bricks were synthetically resinous; contained no metallic lead. Hence they were vulnerable to the ray—as was the weird machinery within the structure.

Jon Ad triggered the gun. Puff after semivisible puff of bluish ray-gas reached fingers of destruction at the laboratory. Plioglass bricks began to melt, fuse, disintegrate. Like a shimmering mirage the building ran together, annealing its mass with the electronic atom-apparatus which Wilm Vult had invented. And at long last the spot was nothing but a brownish heap of liquescent rubble—in which lay buried forever the corpse that had been Vult and the thing that had been Heln's evil anti-twin.

Then Jon Ad took Heln to his antigrav car, touched the controls. His arm went around her waist and she nestled sweetly against him as they headed into the roseate sunrise—toward happiness.

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Stakes on the Black

[Continued from page 73]

What he had seen was not in front, where the harquebusiers stood, their weapons under their arms, and their wicks glowing. It was in the maid's room. And that sight had taken all the devil-may-care spirit out of him.

What he had seen was Henri IV of France and the little dark-haired maid in amorous embrace.

He had seen the girl in the King's arms, her half bare breasts quivering against his leather jerkin, and the King's great moustaches, standing out on either side of the maid's cheeks.

"Surrender, Monsieur de Crillon, or my men fire!"

"I surrender, then, in His Majesty's name," said Crillon.

"Good! Throw down your swords!"

There came a forward rush, and in a moment François and Crillon were disarmed. But François was only thinking that his King, the mirror of chivalry, had abandoned Crillon, left him to die, while he was seeking consolation in the arms of the little dark-haired maid. And yet that wasn't Henri's way.

And how the devil had Henri got into the maid's room? Had he been hiding there all the time, or had he slipped in while the girl was fighting with Mademoiselle d'Estaing?

NOBODY studied the young man's face closely in the darkness of the corridor. Everybody assumed that it was Henri of Navarre who had been captured. With yells of triumph, the two prison-

ers were pushed and prodded forward.

François looked at Crillon, and saw that the old soldier hadn't seen what he had seen, didn't know that King Henri was skulking in the maid's embraces while they were going to their death. So he decided to keep silent. No word of his should ever reveal the fact that Henri IV was a poltroon.

But when they reached the outside, somebody shook François by the shoulders, and shouted, "This isn't Henri of Navarre!"

"The devil, no!" They pressed about the youth. "This is a boy, and Henri is an old man, in his middle thirties."

"But his moustaches—look at his moustaches!"

"This is a boy, I say!" They dragged François into the light of a flambeau. "Who are you?"

"I am Henri IV, King of France."

"You lie, you lie, you lie!"

"Look at my moustache!" cried François.

The King of Navarre is skulking

"This fellow is an impostor! inside the Hotel. Get him!"

"No!" Mademoiselle d'Estaing rushed forward and flung her arms about François. "This is my liege lord, Henri!"

"Aye, this is my king. Are you all crazy?" growled Crillon. "Take your filthy hands off me, wretches. I am not used to being handled."

"He is an impostor. Take these two to the Saint Lazare. And search the Hotel, room by room.

The king of Navarre is skulking somewhere within it!" shouted the officer.

Crillon and François were torn away.

IT WAS very cold in the vault of the Saint Lazare prison. François was seated on a heap of mouldy straw, listening to the scampering of the rats, and waiting for the dawn, which was not now far away.

General Grommeyer had promised François a quick execution without the preliminary of a sentence, as a Huguenot spy captured under martial law. He had refused him all information as to the fate of Crillon in their brief interview. As the Sieur was a Huguenot, of course he would not need a priest.

Through the tiny aperture in his cell, as dawn came up, François could see the square enclosure of the Saint Lazare. Something was stirring in it. Half-a-dozen laboring men were dragging something into it.

As the light increased, François was able to make out the hideous form of the wheel. Occasionally, in the past, he had stopped to look at some poor devil being broken on the wheel, and had felt sorry for him, but he had never felt any intimate interest in the mechanism until now.

It was not actually a wheel. That was to say, sometimes the implement was so constructed as to make a half-revolution, but generally it was built to stand immovable. It was simply arranged for the victim's limbs to be attached to the spokes, after which the executioner broke them with an iron

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bar. Finally, he broke the victim's chest with a blow that crushed lungs and heart.

The sun came up suddenly, a disk of red across the eastern houses. Footsteps sounded outside the cell. A red-faced man appeared, with half-a-dozen men behind him. He flung himself upon François, and in a moment had trussed his wrists in a steel contraption.

"March, Huguenot!" he shouted.

François marched out of his cell, and into the yard of Saint Lazare. Already a motley group of spectators had assembled. The executioner was leaning upon his bar, his aides, two bottle-nosed ruffians, at his side.

In an instant François was seized and bound. About him he saw a troop of halberdiers, who had appeared miraculously, as if to keep back the spectators who were pressing forward. And it was a turning wheel. The executioner raised his bar as it began to revolve, bringing François head downward. He looked up inquiringly at a little group who came strolling forward.

Upside down, François could still recognize King Henri, Crillon, Mademoiselle d'Estaing, and the saturnine features of the Duc de Mayenne.

THE Duc made a gesture, and the wheel brought the young man back into the human posture. A few motions of the executioner's hands freed him.

Dizzily standing on his feet, François was aware that everybody was laughing at him.

King Henri clapped him on the shoulder. "*Ventre Saint Gris!*" he shouted. "This is a valorous young man, and meant no offense by the killing of the watch."

"Well," answered Mayenne sourly, "neither praise nor punishment can undo that, Sire."

That word, "Sire," told François everything. It meant that Mayenne had acknowledged Henri as his liege lord—as King of France instead of merely King of Navarre. Then the war was ended! As he gazed at the Duc, dumfounded, Henri clapped him on the shoulder again.

"The wheel was but a show, a play, a jest," he said, "for last night Monsieur le Duc assured me that your life should not be forfeited. Yet he deemed some punishment necessary for the killing of the guard and the—hum—invasion of Mademoiselle's Hotel."

François saw the twinkle in the King's eye. He looked at Mademoiselle. She was fully attired, of course, and the rounded orbs that had come as a boon and a blessing to him were concealed beneath a bodice of extraordinary stiffness. Only by actual experience could one have guessed what curves and undulations lay beneath it.

François looked back at Henri, who continued, sternly:

"Such excesses on the part of young men are rightly discountenanced by Monsieur de Mayenne. However, he has decided, out of his friendship for me, to parole you in the custody of Mademoiselle."

"*Ventre bleu*, I wish I were in his shoes!" shouted Crillon.

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day—François and Mademoiselle d'Estaing crossed the enclosure of the Saint Lazare. Outside the gate one of the newfangled hackney-coaches was drawn up, the coachman and the footman resplendent in the gold and scarlet of the d'Estaing livery.

François handed Mademoiselle inside and followed her. His hopes were rising, but still he wasn't quite sure where they were going.

"You have been a great fool," said Mademoiselle, "and, if you wish to find favor in my eyes, I

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must demand that you reduce those moustaches of yours to the ordinary size and length. They are not only dangerous, but they are too ticklish."

"I shall obey you, Mademoiselle."

"You narrowly escaped the wheel. But everything is now straightened out, and I have swallowed my chagrin over that little maid of mine, for whose sake Henri concealed himself in her room last night. I shall console myself with a more constant lover."

"Ah, Mademoiselle—!"

"It was all your fault for not telling me sooner that Henri is playing the black instead of the red, which signifies that he has chosen to become a member of the true Catholic faith, instead of continuing the war. His conversion is to be announced publicly today, and therefore the quarrel between him and Monsieur de Mayenne and the Catholic League is ended.

"Thinking that this was all understood, Henri permitted Crillon to make a mock fight instead of continuing at his side, while Monsieur de Mayenne was sending aid to him. Do you understand now?"

"Yes, I have been a fool, Mademoiselle," François agreed.

"And now that the war is ended, what are your plans?"

"Alas, Mademoiselle, being peniless, I must seek another master."

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